

URBAN LANDSCAPE STUDIES  
EUPHORIGENIC LANDSCAPES

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**LAREG**



TAIPEI  
25° 02'N 121° 38'E

|            |                           |
|------------|---------------------------|
| SIZE       | 271.80 KM <sup>2</sup>    |
| POPULATION | 2,618,772                 |
| DENSITY    | 9,600/KM <sup>2</sup>     |
| ELEVATION  | 10 M                      |
| TIME ZONE  | CHINA STANDARD<br>(UTC+8) |

## TAIPEI LANDSCAPE

Yulang Zeng

Taipei is the “pre-eminent district” of Taiwan, with the dream of being an “international metropolis”. Since the 1970s, Taipei has changed a lot due to its fast economic growth and urban construction. The old image of a “watertown” with alleys and channels disappeared, while filled in “urban forest” with many concrete buildings. In Chinese, the traditional phrase “Morality as noble as water” is used to praise the best personality since water has the character to favour all without caring about fame and fortune. This phrase expresses the respect for water. A city with water is always regarded to be livable, whereas Taipei undergoes a process of abandoning this quality and its connection with water. The urbanization “has changed the watertown into dry land, pouring down the last fleet water off the basin” (舒国治, 2010). Compared with the central and southern regions, nowadays Taipei is always complained about its ruthless competition and tremendous pressure in urban life. Although having the common disadvantages of modern cities such as traffic congestion, high housing prices and air pollution, it is still attractive for youths in Taiwan and tourists from the

mainland of China. The city is a mixture of modernity and tradition. The construction of the city is always going on and new history of urban life is being overwritten, supporting its users with convenient and fast changing images of urban life, and this means there is no “eternal” here (舒国治, 2010).

### THE LEVEL OF REGIONAL CULTURES AND NATURAL MORPHOLOGIES – A CITY ON DISSIMILAR LANDFORM

Taipei, as the name implies, is the city located in the north of Taiwan [“pei” means “north” in Chinese]. Due to the reclaiming of Han Chinese and the tea trading business on Danshui River, this region became the third important commercial region in Taiwan from the 18th to 19th century. There is a local proverb that says “first Tannan, second Lugang, third Monga”<sup>1</sup>[一府二鹿三艋舺] to describe the city status by the end of Qing dynasty, Monga representing Taipei. Since the end of the 19th century, with the advantage of being a political centre, Taipei has become the most prosperous region in Taiwan and this condition continues till today.

Due to its highly developed commerce and prosperous culture, Taipei gets great attention from the Chinese society. Now over 80 percent of the population is engaged in the service industry. The city is willing to accept

and transmit the latest technology and lifestyle from Europe, America and Japan. Lately, the government pays great attention to construct a “livable city” which expresses itself as a multicultural metropolis. The well-served public facilities and social welfare ensure the convenience of living. The lifestyle of “LOHAS” [乐活] and “sustainable” have become the newest label of Taipei, although they are not the unique ideas from the island. Here, both the urban form and the attitude of life are always changing.

Taipei is a basin surrounded by mountains and rivers, and the natural landscape shows great spatial-temporal difference<sup>2</sup>. The contrasting geographical features arise from the appearance of the island: Taiwan was formed by one tectonic plate sliding under the other, so it owns undulating mountain ranges in south-north direction and an endless coastline. The geological structure of Taiwan is young and active, it is a continuous formation process of new terrain till today. This means that, comparing with other nations who live in the stable continental plates, the residents on this island will experience more earthquakes, landslides and other disasters during their life.

The main parts of the Datun volcano range, which are located in the north of Taipei Basin, are under the manage-

ment of the Yangmingshan National Park. Compared to its highest peak over 1000 meters and volcanic steam underground, the low-lying hilly terrains bordering the Taipei Basin in east and south direction appear tender and more mild. Danshui River flows on the western side of the Taipei Basin, it is also the natural borderline of the administrative division between cities. The earliest two flourishing settlements, Monga and Dadaocheng, were located on the right side of the river. Keelung River goes through the north of the basin with many curves, and other smaller rivers which also originate from the surrounding mountains have a closer intertwining with land. After going across the edge of the basin or flowing through a small district, they run into Danshui River or Keelung River, and finally flow into the Taiwan Strait at the northern tip of the island. Geological movements shaped the surrounding mountains of Taipei, while rivers formed the basin plain. Finally, the actions of human being reshape the morphologies of the land in every possible area.

#### THE LEVEL OF EVERYDAY LIFE — LOVE AND HATE FOR CONVENIENT URBAN LIFE

Taipei often appears in movies. Through the artist's lens, the true city feature and

the impressionistic everyday life are represented. Participants in the city and spectators from the outside are able to feel the coexisting beauty and cruelty of the city.

There are enough work opportunities with challenge in Taipei, that's why youths both love and hate the city. In 2008, the movie "Cape No. 7" became one of the top-grossing films in Taiwan's cinematic history. In the opening scene, the leading actor fails in his music career in Taipei. Unwillingly, he has to go back to his hometown, a small village located in the south coast, on his motorcycle. Before leaving, he just breaks his guitar into pieces while hardly cursing Taipei. Here, the city is depicted as a dreaming place, where this young man pursues his future, but turns out to be a nightmare in the end. This crowded city has the temptation of opportunity and the despair of failure together.

But if one forgets the troubles in working during the daytime for subsistence, one will find the fun of living in Taipei which is always full of people and where the liveliness lasts until the early morning. The movie "Au Revoir Taipei" illustrates the great dissimilarities between two urban locations: the bookstore and the night market. In the warmly illuminated Eslite Bookstore [诚品书店] with elegant atmosphere, the main actor focuses on his French

study solely, as if there is nothing else important in the whole world; while under neon lights in the loud and crowded night market he shares delicious and cheap snacks with his best friend, enjoying daily life together. Meeting demands of both spiritual needs and tasteable appetites, nightlife in Taipei is the charm of the city.

An overview of Taipei Basin via Google Maps demonstrates the contrast. The high-density urban area is totally different from the surrounding mountains which are covered by evergreen trees. In the city area, the urban blocks are divided by different road systems, turning the neighbourhoods into irregular shape. The arrangement of modernist building boxes with different heights follows the direction of surrounding roads and streets. Different colours of the retrofitting roofs first eliminate the overall order and then create a texture of collage. The firebreak alleys inside the blocks are narrow and always full of illegal rooms and temporarily parking motorcycles, so for citizens who live here it is hard to find a place to enjoy landscape nearby. The crowded states of city residence are serious in many regions of the basin that have been developed for a long time. The overcrowded city residences are a serious problem in many regions of the basin ...

However, walking on a normal street or

alley in Taipei, one can feel the interesting atmosphere of city life immediately. The grocery stores and restaurants are operating along the streets, working well on meeting most needs of residents' daily life. Sign-boards, awnings, sunshades, and neon signs are designed and manufactured by local businessmen. Coupled with motorcycles which are almost everywhere, they work together to form the streetscape of Taipei. Motorcycling serves the daily traffic life of local people well. In "Au Revoir Taipei", the image of the main actor driving his motorcycle through the streets at night appears again and again, proving that the motorcycle is just a common tool for locals. The parking spaces provided by the government cannot support the large number of users, therefore streets directly work as parking space. Streets and alleys painted white designate parking spaces, yellow marks forbidden areas, thus Taipei becomes a huge motorcycle parking lot. Nature has created the primary landscape and topography of Taipei and continues to show its power. Till today, by means of the annual typhoon and frequent earthquakes, natural power demonstrates its impact on citizens' lives. The perennial struggle and co-existence with the forces of nature has formed a special type of habit. Local people have a calm manner when facing natural

disasters and accustomed to repairing the city continuously. After the experience of the large earthquake in 1999, the Taipei citizens hardly pay attention to minor earth shakes. However, they are enough to make international tourists from the European continent feel uneasy, and the accustomed attitude of local people makes them even more astonished. The typhoon usually makes landfall from July to September every year. The heavy rain and strong wind temporarily disturb the regular routine of inhabitants' work and study, but daily life never stops. Instead, the typhoon seasons create opportunities for the citizens to stay at home and rest or even go outside. The special rainy climate has formed a lot of arcades along the streets in the traditional neighbourhoods of Taipei. The arcades are good at keeping the pedestrians out of sun exposure and downpour, and only belong to the walkers. At the same time the streets of the city get two levels of façade. During the past hundred years, Taipei has changed from an agricultural plain to a concrete jungle, and artificial constructions made everyday life and landscape in a condition of isolation. But please do not forget that it is a place with unique geographical location and abundant landscape morphologies.

## THE LEVEL OF GLOBAL POWER AND AUTONOMOUS SYSTEMS – THE “TOP-DOWN” CITY CONSTRUCTION DRIVEN BY POLITICAL AND COMMERCIAL INTERESTS

The city morphology of Taipei was first influenced by political power when it was chosen to be the new prefectural capital by the end of Qing dynasty. There are great differences among the three main settlements: Taipei walled city, Monga and Dadaocheng. Monga and Dadaocheng were earlier townships established for business and having grown by themselves, while the new inner city was designed regularly and only served the governor. These three main districts were located along Dan-shui River and coexisted as the most prosperous western area in old days.

With the people assembling, the area of urbanization in Taipei sprawled rapidly over the past half century. As a result, for some Taipei residents the administrative district of Taipei means almost half of the whole island. Under the political encouragement and commercial power, the urban space expanded from west to east, till the foothills and the border of the mountains where construction is difficult. Prosperous business districts also move along the city developing route. It first located in Ximending [西门町] who presents the old shopping district in Monga. Then the

Eastern Districts[东区] of the city became the new downtown, where a lot of department stores were operated. And in recent years the Xinyi Planning District[信义计划区] which works as the second centre of the city and is the most popular urban space in Taipei.

The Xinyi Planning District was once called “Taipei Prairie” to criticize the government’s disability in development. Maybe before the process of urbanization, there really was prairie landscape at the foot of the surrounding mountains, but now it is changing to the most expensive urban function district in Taiwan. Regular road grids, large construction land, and huge volumes of buildings are all emphasizing the modernity of this site. Although the main purpose of constructing this district is to establish a new commercial and financial centre, the Xinyi Planning District now serves more as a synthesis of exclusive residential district, large-scale amusement and entertainment centres and big shopping malls. It is a new consumer space in the city. At the beginning of development, the government insisted on strict rules of planning and urban design, so the city texture here is completely different from other areas of the city. Simulating Manhattan, it succeeds in getting an image of an “international metropolis”, while contemporaneously it shows a lack of

local context and identity. Taipei 101 is decorated with the traditional symbol of Ruyi [如意] on its façade to emphasize its location, but still it is an outstanding modernistic super skyscraper whose top floors always submerge in the clouds.

With the hope of “bringing Taipei to the world”, Taipei 101 ranked officially as the world’s tallest skyscraper for five years. This manmade mega-structure helps the local Taipei residents accomplish a great confidence. Attracting worldwide attention and confirmation is kind of exciting on the one hand, and a feeling of satisfaction for fighting against the elements and conquering nature on the other hand. Standing on the flat Taipei plain, Taipei 101 seems lonely, even in the Xinyi Planning District where are more high buildings than in other districts. It can only match with Shin Kong Mitsukoshi3, which is located in the old western district, with a height less than half of Taipei 101. These two skyscrapers shape the skyline of Taipei. Tourists from abroad are willing to go to the observatory of Taipei 101 to get an overview of the city, with the main scenery of roofs in different colour and size. They can receive a lot of information about urban fabric and landmarks, and can see the surrounding mountains far away on sunny days. Although approving this

new landmark a lot, the local residents rarely buy the ticket which equals the price of four lunchboxes, and prefer to use the shopping malls at the bottom of the building. On the last day of 2010, the new year’s firework lasting for about three hundred seconds attracted nearly 70 million people in the Xinyi Planning District. The show made the skyscraper look like a big firecracker, and this big party demonstrates the old tradition of setting firecrackers which dates back over 2000 years. The collective carnival imitates the western way of celebration. At this moment, political power and everyday life are combined in Taipei.

The change of highest prices for real estate shows the trace of urban development and reflects the shift of value for landscape. Yangmingshan was used to represent a rich area for wealthy people, since there was also located the palace of the president. It is a place close to natural beauty and far away from the bustling city. The development in the Xinyi Planning District led to a greater density of exclusive resident buildings than in other areas of the city. During the urbanization process, the citizens’ aspiration for convenient modern life predominates the interest in ecology and landscape. The latest news shows that the housing price along Keelung River rises rapidly, due to the new riverside park and landscape. People who can-



not afford a house in Yangmingshan also could hold landscape, although the ownership means to overlook the landscape far from a window instead of staying inside the riverside park. The orientation of taste for landscape changes from natural to artificial, and then man-made natural. It suggests that the value of landscape in citizens' daily life is confirmed again.

The infrastructure systems set up by the political power are used for the city's form and regular operation. The construction of railway and road systems that started by the end of Qing dynasty marks the beginning of Taipei's modernization. The following Japanese rulers and Chinese Nationalist Party governor did a lot to accomplish the infrastructure systems, in order to meet the transportation needs for passengers and goods.

On the south of Keelung River, the flat topography made the city a white paper and easy to construct. The infrastructure systems were established rapidly and well without considering too much the natural landform. The city road network with Baroque style was planned in the Japanese colonial period, and is responsible for inner city traffic. Some of the roads just covered the Liugongjun<sup>4</sup> [璫公圳], which used to work as the irrigation system in the agricultural society. Freeways lay along the rivers and

the express-ways are overhead, working together to satisfy the needs of crossing the city rapidly. Rail and high-speed rail systems link Taipei with other cities on the island. The construction of the Taipei Rapid Transit System (MRT) eases traffic congestion on the ground, and it offers convenient inner city traffic to the urban residents. At the beginning, the construction has been subject to a lot of criticism, but now local people are proud of its cleanness and efficiency. On the north side of Keelung River, the topography is more varying because it is close to the foothill of Yangmingshan district. The city fabric there follows the order of mountains and rivers, presenting an intertextural configuration with natural land-form. There, the Hi-tech Promotion Center in Neihu, Guandu Nature Park and Beitou district organize its surrounding area separately with their own development planning.

The infrastructure systems reorganize the structure of the city with its own operating rule, at the same time they separate the original living space. For example, the over-bridge of expressways and MRT made the open space of the inner city more fragmented, meanwhile the grey spaces under the overhead undermine the quality of city life because of its darkness and danger, and then they are asked to redesign and reconstruction. The flower and jade mar-

kets under Jianguo Road are good examples that use the daily life to improve the space quality under the overheads. But mostly, the big shadow of the overhead and the resting taxi drivers just make the walkers go faster.

Henri Lefèvbre worried about modern cities formed by great political power lacking the connection with everyday life and then losing their local cultural context, while the persons living in these cities are under invisible control, tending to be devoid of freedom. The urbanization of Taipei is a process of abandon and of losing its own character. But the broad building mode with the mixed use of residence and commerce makes sure that human activities can appear anytime at every corner of the city. This phenomenon makes the city residents believe in their own liberty and the vitality of the city. In the Eastern Districts and the Xinyi Planning District, groups of youths who are preparing to enter nightclub even emerge at midnight. The night markets located separately in the city are always bustling and crowded. Whereas the office area in the Hi-tech Promotion Center in Neihu on the north of Keelung River seems to be a dead city with so many empty streets and roads at night and at weekends.

Up to now, Taipei is still in the process of top-down construction and redevelop-

ment, in order to offer a better city environment, and then improve its competition ability in the world market. Every customer space in the city is full of people. However, citizens are relatively alienated from landscape.

#### THE MEDIATING LEVEL – LIFESTYLE CONSISTS OF LAND, WATER, MOUNTAINS AND HUMANS

As the mediating level, city and landscape are expected to connect the everyday life and global power, and to reduce the social contradictions emerging in cities because of modernization and industrialization. For Taipei, the mediating level supported by a special landform and landscape has another two roles. One is searching future orientation for the region, the other is releasing the impact from natural power to urban everyday life. The fabric of streets, green space and water makes up the mediating level inside the city, the surrounding mountains constitute it outside.

With its warm and humid climate, the streets of Taipei are almost all lined with shady trees. Except the sunny summer days and rainy typhoon days, it is good to walk on the streets. The variety shops along the streets increase the fun of walking. The arcade is a complementary space of open street, especially on bad weather days. But the fast speed of

city life makes the residents prefer taking the motorcycle, car and MRT to walking. The tourists love the experience of walking in the streets of Taipei, and the writer could offer a list of “snacks, alleys and old books” in Taipei for sightseeing (舒国治, 2010). In contrast, local residents who are always busy on working days only want to escape this crowded city and drive to Yilan or other surrounding suburbs on weekends.

There are two boulevards going across the city. Renai Road in the horizontal direction goes across the main prosperous region of the city and connects the Presidential Office Building in the west of the basin and Taipei City Hall in the east part; while in the vertical direction, Dunhua North and South Road work as the central axes of the city, separating the past busy district of Ximending and the current developing area of the Xinyi Planning District. The two axes are not visually strong on maps, but for local residents they are traditional green axes. The boulevards are cool and comfortable in summer time, but the utilization of the tree-lined walking paths inside is limited by the nearby motor vehicles. There are not as many people in Taipei as in Europe who jog in the city during the day time. Compared to walking in the natural shadowed paths, citizens prefer to use the commercial streets with shops. These shops with

air-condition offer cold wind and beautiful things. As a type of landscape in urban environment, the boulevard road system acts more in visual experience. So if the boulevard road system wants to work better in the mediating level, more connection with everyday life is needed.

The urban parks, green areas attached to huge public buildings and parkways work together as a kind of fabric overlapping everyday life in the crowded city, and they offer the residents who find it inconvenient to enter the mountain area a comfortable space to enjoy leisure. These years, the government pays great attention to construct bicycle paths along the riverside and streets. The bicycle paths cover the two boulevards mentioned above, Daan park, Xinyi Planning District and National Taiwan University. These regions are urban open space with a higher rate of green and good traffic conditions, easy for the citizens to use. Interestingly, although there are a lot of good natural landscape resources around the city, the highest number of visitors appears in two political spaces: Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall and National Dr. Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall. The good usage condition of these two areas indicates that once forgotten the purpose of showing political power, the urban open space with good traffic conditions

and land-scape can be the mediating level in city. The local citizens love to fly a kite, bask, and enjoy the city life here, even surrounded by high-rise buildings.

However, the water system seems not so easy to control. The straightened project of Keelung River offered the city new land resources, but also caused urban waterlog in large areas during the typhoon season, and finally, a new flood diversion channel was built to drain the heavy rainwater. The landscape of riverside parks along Keelung River is well designed with many bicycle paths, with the hope of attracting more residents to use the water system. The dams along the river imply the riverside parks which are also potential flood plains during the typhoon season. The landscape space here in fact works as a buffer area. It mitigates the great impact from natural damage power to everyday life. Liugongjun was a man-made irrigation system covering great areas on the plain. During the urbanization of Taipei, the canals were changed into sanitary sewers and almost covered by roads or streets, so the old system became latent. Lately, there is a tendency to reestablish the water-scape of Liugongjun in certain areas, in order to reconnect the human beings and the water system. This change responds to the public's desire of land-

scape in high density urban areas. It is a way of using the existing infrastructure as landscape element and expanding its ecological function. The case of Keelung River is the failure of man-made effect on natural sources, and the new design mind in Liugongjun shows the change from admiring artificial constructions to thinking about how to co-exist with environment harmoniously. The administration district of Taipei includes the mountains and hills around the basin, but the central basin areas are busier and more recognizable. The surrounding mountains just wait peacefully to connect with human life. The Yangmingshan region on the north of the basin is an extremely good viewpoint to observe Taipei. The texture of the city is drawn clearly by the lighting at night during the whole year. The students love to drive a motorcycle while the workers may prefer the car to go to the mountain area in darkness. It is a common and popular kind of relaxation. In contrast to the bustling noise in the city, the mountains are quiet and stable. In the same site, the blossom viewing in spring offers the city residents, who spend most of their time in the city "concrete jungle", an opportunity to feel and get in contact with nature. Large numbers of citizens would like to gather around the bamboo lake on holidays to enjoy the harvest time once

every year. Although located in a natural landscape park, the calla fields in the bamboo lake are planned and planted artificially. The tours during the calla viewing are often coupled with boring waiting in line since there are too many visitors. But the attraction of natural blossom viewing will never decrease. Since the 1970s, a lot of sightseeing footpaths have been established in the mountains and hills around the basin, so that the citizens can make good use of the natural resources. Mountain trails were used by the local inhabitants as the route of trading with citizens in old days, but now they offer the opportunities for citizens to go into nature. The government encourages the residents to climb the mountains on holidays, since citizens can get the opportunity to experience the change of earth surface from flat plain to hilly mountains during the tour, and improve physical fitness. Simultaneously, they go through a kind of lifestyle that is close to nature, and the direct experience with a butterfly, firefly, waterfall, or volcano jet hole offers the visitors fun and completely different landscape experiences compared to the urban artificial environment.

Maokong Gondola [猫空缆车, Crystal Cabin telfer system in Maokong district] is an example that infrastructure in the the global power level promotes

the connection between everyday life and landscape. Maokong district is a good place for leisure with drinking tea and eating chicken food. After the set up of the gondola lift system, there are more visitors going to this district for rest and enjoying the natural landscape. Although with a potential security risk of debris flow, the basements of several pillars are not totally stable, still a great number of Taipei residents came to visit the Maokong Gondola after it was restored. In such condition, the landscape experience is overlapped with the use of a new transportation system, they stimulate the local everyday life to behave against the enormous energy of nature. In Taipei, city and landscape connect the gap between the everyday life level and the global power level. Meanwhile, they also mitigate the impact of natural forces on urban life. After the rapid urbanization process which copies the model of the Western world, Taipei needs to think about how to support and develop the city. The future prosperity should have a closer relationship with landscape.

#### CONCLUSION: A CONSTANTLY CHANGING CITY

The rapid changes of urban spatial structures and life in Taipei can be seen as a local living strategy in a land where frequent natural disasters happen.

Here, the emergence of new concepts and high-tech products in the mall and delicious food in the restaurants and night markets, work together to stimulate the daily consumption of urban residents, and they rapidly love the new and loathe the old. This kind of change constitutes the vitality of life in Taipei. But the emerging new way of lifestyle made people dizzy, so they are not bent on feeling the unique peace and special beauty of landscape. Compared with the direct lure and easily obtainable satisfaction of creature comforts in the city consumer space, the mediating level should expand its territory to be more important in the citizens' value system. Although the disadvantages of the Western modern urban planning methods have been reviewed and reflected, the bad memory of backwardness in technology and culture during the past century, and the spell of external powers made Taiwan accept the foreign values largely without any reservations in the past. If it is possible to be involved in the global value system, then the copying and imitation of Western lifestyle is not bad. So Xinyi Planning District and Taipei 101 became the city images, because in this land, the happiness of being accepted by the global power can overcome the fear of being bounded. In the movie "Au Revoir Taipei" appear a lot of street scenes, they

are the best representation of the marketplace atmosphere for local Taiwan culture. However, they are evaluated as "very European " because of their "petit-bourgeois"<sup>5</sup>[小资] character. It denies the value of local landscape.

Taipei used to accept the western scientific knowledge and design concept in an earlier age, but now it is facing the replacement of the emerging cities in mainland China. The temporary advantages give the city still time to think about the developing pattern for the future. It is impossible for the city to copy the experience of advanced countries totally again, so the deep development and revival of local natural resources become a viable option, and this requires a more close relationship between everyday life and the mediating level. The surrounding mountains are important landscape resources who are never neglected. And the boulevards, water ways and urban open space should play more important roles in the city, although over the past 40 years they have already been changed a lot. In this rapid changing city, no matter good or bad, everything disappears quickly. And maybe this state of constant change is another face of the "eternal" Taipei.

## ENDNOTES

[1].舒国治(2010), 水城台北, 皇冠文化, 台北

<sup>1</sup> A Taiwan proverb describes the top three harbour cities along the coastline and responses to the reclamation history of Taiwan from south to north. Third Monga here means Taipei.

<sup>2</sup> The total land area of Taiwan is about 36,000 square kilometers. There are more than 100 mountains over 3000 meters, while the island is surrounded by sea, so it takes less than one hour to experience the landscape changes from mountains to sea.

<sup>3</sup> It is a department store sited in a skyscraper. The skyscraper was built in 1993 with a height of 244 meters.

<sup>4</sup> Liugongjun is the irrigation waterway system constructed in Qing dynasty, and it is the presentation of waterscape in Taipei till the 1970s. Now the old waterways are mostly covered or filled in for urban roads.

<sup>5</sup> Petit-bourgeois is a lifestyle of urban white-collar who are chasing modern taste, living standards, and arts.