

The Collective Appropriation of Public Spaces

Case study of urban squares in Harbin, China

Yiping ZHANG¹; Yves SCHOONJANS²; Gisèle GANTOIS³

¹ Department of Architecture, University of Leuven (KU Leuven)
9000 Ghent, Belgium

+32 (0) 487 152 798, yiping.zhang@kuleuven.be (correspondent author)

² Department of Architecture, University of Leuven (KU Leuven)
9000 Ghent, Belgium

³ Department of Architecture, University of Leuven (KU Leuven)
9000 Ghent, Belgium

Keywords: Urban public space, collectivism, senior citizens, Square Dance, local identity

Introduction

Public space is an important component of urban social life since it facilitates public activities. For decaying areas, it also has the potential to act as a catalyst for local community vibrancy and to improve people's quality of life [1]. In China, as the process of urban-rural integration advances, the urban population explodes. However, because the available land does not provide adequate space in a timely manner, the limited public spaces, particularly those located near residential areas and not profit-oriented, are constantly contested by individual users and group users with varying interests. Furthermore, Chinese people, especially older generations, were disciplined with the concept of collectivism since birth. It is natural that senior citizens are used to living or acting in a collective, and that they prefer to be acknowledged as a part of a collective rather than an individual, given their education and work experience during Mao's era (1949-1976). Spontaneous collective activities are popular all around China.

Methodology

This paper uses in-depth fieldwork to discover the everyday use and behind-the-scenes logic of two public squares, as case studies, in an industrial workers' neighborhood in Harbin. A combination of multiple approaches is necessary in the fieldwork: structured observation, behavioral counting and register, interview, and tracking. Data was obtained by my own observation and recording, and informal narratives from different groups on the ground.

Discussion and Finding

It begins with the introduction of Xiangqing Garden and Muqin Square, and the cataloging of behaviors through structured observation. Secondly, the spatio-temporal analysis of collective appropriations is highlighted (Figure 1). From the interview with collective activity participants and individual users, activity form, internal organization, and external communication of selected groups are investigated and discussed. The findings reveal that the public places are deeply collectivized. They are divided into pieces precisely, occupied by a certain group(s) within a fixed period of time. The agreement of division is unwritten and normally conducted historically according to the arrival order. Due to the limited square area and highly-concentrated activity time, nearly every meter is occupied by some group in the evening. In general, there is a dynamic balance of contest-comprise among groups throughout years. A group, with a tight or flexible organizational structure, has very homogenous participants, and different groups absorb various participants. For individual users, although some complain that such collective activities bring them annoyance, the majority has a don't-care or favorable attitude from the informal interview during my fieldwork. As the local administrators limit the activity time strictly, rare conflicts happen between neighboring residents and activity collectives because of noise disturbance.

In the third part, a theoretical discussion of the rationality and necessity of such collective activities from a historical viewpoint is conducted. It argues that besides the function of physical exercise, the collective activities re-construct and intensify the participant's sense of belonging and the local community's identity. Especially for the retired industrial employees, collective activities are nearly all of their social life and the only way to keep in touch with their old acquaintances. This study concludes by presenting the selected places' existing shortcomings and opportunities from the authors' observation combined with locals' perspectives. Considering the widespread collective appropriation of public spaces in Chinese cities, some practical strategies aimed at improving the adaptability and flexibility of urban public spaces are proposed.

Acknowledgments

This research is funded by China Scholarship Council (CSC), project No.201906120045.

References

- [1] Schoonjans, Yves, and Zhang, Yiping. (2020), Interview with Yves Schoonjans: Theoretical Development of Collective Spaces and its Interplay with Urban Life. Beijing Planning Review, no. 05: pp191-195.

Biography

Yiping Zhang is a doctoral researcher at KU Leuven. His research interest mainly lies in collective spaces, industrial heritage, urban history, and community regeneration.

Yves Schoonjans is a Professor in architectural history and theory at KU Leuven. He is Dean of the Faculty of Architecture.

Gisèle Gantois is a Professor in Architecture and Development of Community Heritage at KU Leuven and an architect who specializes in the restoration and adaptive use of built heritage.

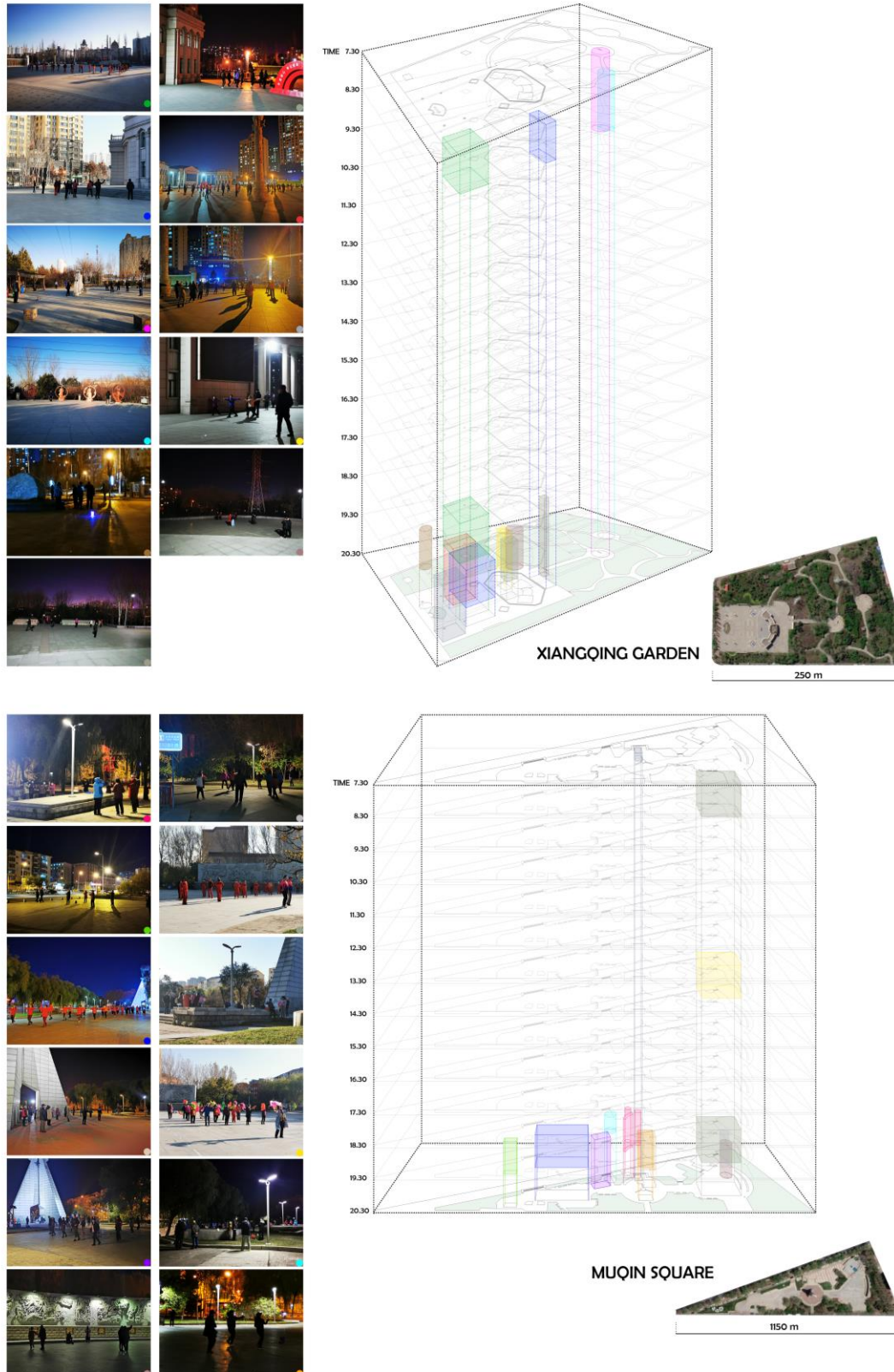


Figure 1: Spatio-temporal analysis of collective appropriations (Source: the authors)