

Analysis on Contemplative Spaces in China and Their Indications to Collaboration

Introduction

Contemplative collaboration is a topic that addresses both individuals' mindfulness and positive group dynamics. On the one hand, contemplative practice can make a student a better collaborator, in the way that it encourages students to listen more, to be more confident to express their own opinions, and to be more open to embracing diversity. On the other hand, doing contemplative practices together as a group helps build a stronger team, and can help further enhance the connections between team members.

The University of Virginia is planning to build a contemplative collaboration space to create a space for contemplation and collaboration that is inclusive of everyone, reduces the stress of students and improves the wellbeing of students (Germano, 2019). This project aims to study the integration of contemplation in Chinese education system. More than 100 million Chinese individuals live with depression, and around 20% of students at the tertiary education level suffer from mental health issues (Mikalajūnaitė, 2017). Under such circumstances, contemplative spaces thrive as a reaction to the increasing need for self-meditation. Pairing with Tsinghua University in China, it is found out that there are some contemplative spaces in Chinese universities and companies (especially those high-technology related ones) in order to provide spaces for students and employees to relieve stress, but it is not identified that they could also improve collaboration. My research question is analysis on the contemplative and collaboration spaces in institutions in China and in what ways they could indicate or relate to each other. I am particularly interested in how the strong mindfulness practice in contemplation and the distinct concept of “collaboration” impact the architectural design and use of

contemplative spaces. Through the cross-cultural examination, this study will give deeper insights into the connection between contemplation and collaboration, especially regarding architecture, and provide further evidence and support for the set up of similar contemplative collaborative spaces projects in both the United States and China.

Literature Review

In educational-related or creative-labor-required institutions in China, such as companies and universities where collaboration plays a crucial role in the daily work, there are many contemplative spaces “separately” coexist with the conceivable atmosphere of emphasis on collaborative work. However, putting together as a whole, the concept of contemplative collaboration is still a relatively new term in many Chinese institutions. How would contemplation and collaboration be connected under such circumstances? The question would be tackled through the separate analysis of several architecture examples of contemplation spaces and collaboration spaces in China, and giving insights on what they have in common, and therefore conceiving how contemplation spaces and collaboration spaces could implement each other.

Part I: The New Wutopia

In Shanghai and Suzhou, China, Wutopia labs are thriving to create an environment beneficial for contemplation. While dealing with the problems of mental stress, new wutopia libraries with smooth, sweeping geometries in Shanghai (Designboom, 2019) provides modern reading and contemplative spaces, paid self-study rooms in Shenzhen indicates the rising market of the new needs of contemplative spaces where people are even willing to pay for it. In the new wutopia libraries in Shanghai, above a small reading or meeting room, the ceiling is replaced

with a glass floor to “suggest the illusion of a water’s surface” (Designboom, 2019). Water, light, and their relationships to each other, are all beneficial to creating a contemplative space, according to architect and artist Rebecca Krinke. Water and light gives people different views and reflections and encycles the viewers, where “nerves tense from work would be relaxed there... the room would offer the refuge of a peaceable meditation...”, and new perceptions would also be provoked as cited in *Contemporary Landscape of Contemplation* (Krinke, 2005).

In the wutopia lab in Suzhou, natural lights are also allowed to pour into the room through large windows, and rainbows are simulated with thin perforated aluminum sheets in gradient colors to “let the light design” (Yuting, 2013). Considering the interior design of the architecture, instances appear in the wutopia lab in Suzhou like crafts from modern art exhibitions are placed on stylish cantilevered platforms (Yuting, 2013), incensing people’s sensory stimulation. This artistic design works well in encouraging contemplation in this contemplative architecture because it follows the architectural principles that “contemplation indicates deliberate attention” and “art is often linked to contemplation” proposed by Krinke in her book *Contemporary Landscapes of Contemplation* (Krinke, 2005). As she proposed that, “the artist may be seen as being in a contemplative state or the view is seen as contemplating the work of art...”, this design belongs to the case that art is seen as able to induce a contemplative response (Krinke, 2005).

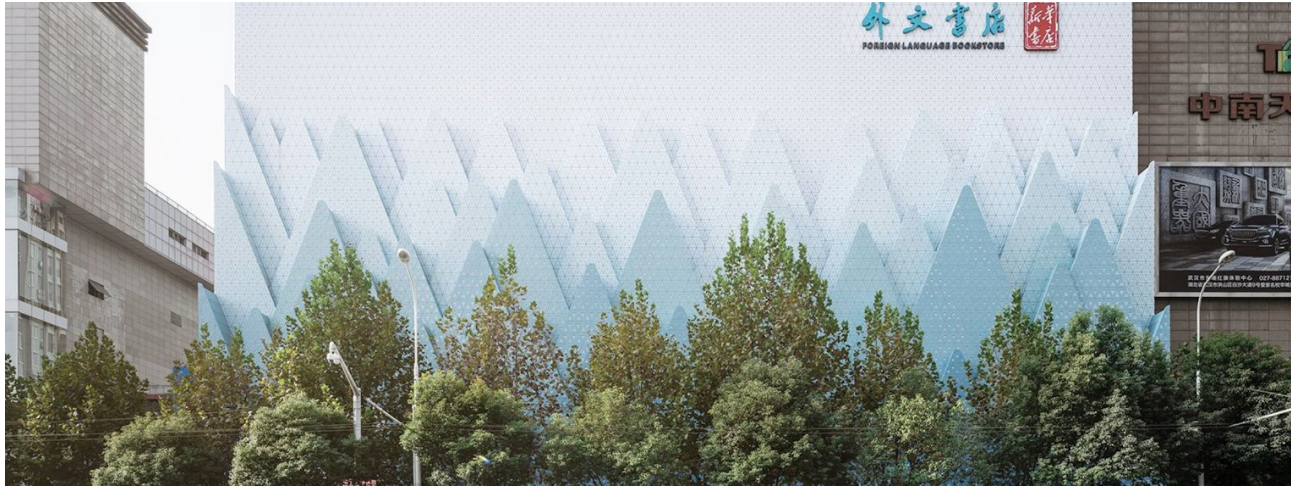


Figure 1. The outside appearance of Wutopia Lab, Shanghai (Designboom, 2019).



Figure 2. The interior design of Wutopia Lab, Suzhou (Designboom, 2019).



Figure 3. The interior design of Wutopia Lab, Suzhou (Designboom, 2019).

These architectural designs make great efforts into incorporating nature into the room as effectively as possible, meeting the principle of “mitigating the impact of urban stress and helping to maintain the health and well being of urban populations” (K.Thwaites, 2006). It can therefore be concluded that these wutopia labs illustrate three overlapping key points of designing a contemplation space: stylish interior and exterior design, incorporating-nature tendency, and sensory artistic stimulation, through which the shared characteristics between designs that encourage contemplation and those that encourage collaboration could be subtly conceived.

Part II: The Coworking Agora

In China, collaboration spaces are represented by thriving of a diversity of shared-coworking spaces, sharing several common characteristics of what a collaboration space

should look like. In Agora, a popular coworking space among the young office workers in Shanghai, the coworking space is divided into four different multi-functional locations, including dedicated working spaces and networking areas (Agora, 2016). This division of places follows the “Zoning” principle proposed by Scott Doorley, an architect and designer at Institute of Design at Stanford University. In his book *Make Space: How to Set the Space for Creative Collaboration*, Doorley proposed that division of spaces is the key for a collaboration space to evolve (Doorley, 2011). Multi-functional divisions are not that detailed in purpose, but they make more space for the room to evolve and inspire people. The most dynamic space in Agora includes an outdoor terrace as well as a renovated bomb shelter that was transformed into an active vault bustling with multi-functional offices and decorated meeting spaces. The potentially-evolving divisions also emerge in the newest intimate area with eight private offices as well as quiet working space. In addition, Doorley’s “Properties” principle is also shown in the design of Agora. Back in the interior design of the Agora, huge French windows are decorated with green plants which allows the sunshine to get into the room as much as possible. Interior light is designed to imitate sunlight to make the working space closer to nature. conceiving the primary users of the collaboration spaces that include community workers, freelancers, and start-ups from a diversity of cultural backgrounds and industries, technological hardware is incorporated everywhere: high-speed internet, air purifier, and sufficient projectors for illustration. It is also obvious that various art crafts and bookshelves are placed to provide inspiration for users, which coincides with the sensory stimulation of the design of Wutopia labs. In this way, sharing of skills and experiences through diverse events including conferences, workshops, personal development activities, and sustainability initiatives are effectively

encouraged. All of these designs, as spatial characters and motivating stimulations, follow the “Properties” principle that they could be used to transfer behavior and mood, and even alter the nature of interaction.

SpaceYun Shanghai Hongqiao is another representative collaboration space located at Hongqiao Center, an economically driven development area, similar to the Agora co-working space. Equipped with basic hardware including seansbags, projectors, scanners and other office equipment, it also provides a good view of the out-door scene of nature, which is made possible by its outdoor terrace and chill-out area (SpaceYun, 2017). To make it comfortable for workers, freelancers, and start-ups from diverse cultural backgrounds and industries, SpaceYun Shanghai Hongqiao offers not only bookable meeting rooms but also a quiet area for focus as well as a lounge for chilling out, which is similar to Agora’s multi-functional four-part division, following Doorley’s principle of multi-functional divisions that divisions make more room for space to evolve (Doorley, 2011). In addition, viewing from the geographical location, Agora is located within a five-minute walk from public transportation in the busy Xuhui District, while SpaceYun is located in the Central Business Center along a dynamic community of its own. It could be easily found out that most of these collaboration spaces are located near major metro stations or transportation hubs, within walking distance to Central Business Centers or economically-driven communities. Therefore, in general, five key points could be concluded from these architectural designs for a collaboration space: incorporating nature, convenient transportation, technological hardware, multifunctional spaces, and artistic elements.



Figure 4. The interior design of Agora Space, Shanghai (Agora, 2016).



Figure 5. The provided supplements of Agora Space, Shanghai (Agora, 2016).



Figure 6. The quiet reading area of Agora Space, Shanghai (Agora, 2016).



Figure 7. The incorporation of natural light in Agora Space, Shanghai (Agora, 2016).

Discussion

In order to have a thorough understanding and analysis of contemplative spaces in China and their indications to collaboration, the STS framework SCOT (the Social Construction of Technology, Bijker, W.E., 2001) will be used to analyze the relevant social groups, interpretative flexibility, especially design flexibility, closure, and technological frame. This project uses the following method to collect the research data. The SCOT is used first by performing stakeholder analysis, which prioritizes students who use the contemplative collaboration spaces most often. Since our focus is the design of the contemplative and collaboration space, architecture-related faculty is also prioritized as an integral stakeholder. Other related stakeholders might include

staff/faculty of the education system who are interested in financial support to maintain the space and fund the design.

Based on the evidence presented in the literature review, it could be concluded that wutopia labs in both Shanghai and Suzhou indicate three overlapping key points which are stylish interior and exterior design, incorporating-nature tendency, and sensory artistic stimulation, while the examples of Agora collaboration spaces and SpaceYun Shanghai Hongqiao illustrate five key points with regard to the architectural designs for a collaboration space, including incorporating nature, convenient transportation, technological hardware, multifunctional spaces, and artistic elements. Considering the shared characteristics between design of contemplation spaces and collaboration spaces in China, two basic criteria could be established with confidence: the incorporation of nature and sensory stimulation. These two basic criteria could therefore be incorporated as two indispensable parts that should be prioritized in the design process of the contemplative collaboration space. Existing work and evidence analysis has shown that China has done a great practice in designing modern contemplative spaces as well as collaboration spaces. It is therefore believed that in order to incorporate collaboration with contemplation, more emphasis on the lacking side of the two parts is needed to indicate the direction of contemplative collaborations. A specific example could contain discussions around topics that address the need for more interactions and communications between people in a contemplative environment, and the construction of more quiet rooms for restorative mindfulness practice in a collaborative environment.

Conclusion

The two basic criteria of the architectural design of contemplation and collaboration spaces are established, which makes incorporation of nature and sensory stimulation two indispensable parts of building the required space. However, more examples of both contemplation spaces and collaboration spaces remain to be analyzed in order to explore more commonalities between contemplation and collaboration. In addition, how contemplation and collaboration could affect and influence each other regarding architectural design could be a potential future research topic. Questions such as whether there is a tendency in China to merge the two terms together or develop contemplation and collaboration spaces separately, whether there are similar architectural design cases related to contemplation and collaboration in other countries still remain to be discussed. It could therefore be forecast that future work includes more interviews with students from other representative universities in China and other other countries, more research into the contemplative space design worldwide and how they could be related to improvement in the efficiency of collaboration.

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