

A Moveable Feast in Semarang

A Street-Vendor Inclusive Urban Landscape

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Reflection

Everything in our environment can be regarded as “landscape”, whether urban or natural, is part of the domain of landscape architects. Landscape architecture is a people oriented design industry that suits societal needs and context, and is especially meaningful yet challenging in the complex urban situation involving overlapping and ever-changing flows with many different stakeholders. Landscape design in this case is a mediator between these stakeholders and provides a better living environment to people. It is thus very challenging to work in the urban context with all these complexities and informalities, but if successful landscape architecture is able to create an even greater influence and catalyst in the urban setting.

Working with urban informality is always interesting and fascinating, as it challenges the conventional bureaucracy design approach of the discipline. It is yet challenging since individuals are intellectual micro-powers that display any possibilities which can never be easily mapped and understood into details. It is still a very difficult issue in the planning and design discipline to genuinely welcome and include the informal groups. An anthropological approach is applied for the theoretical stance in order to observe and analyse the habits of street vendors; however the practicality of the exercise is very limited to time constraints and language barrier. Anthropologists usually spend a relatively long time span observing or being a part of the community in order to fully understand their mindset and behaviour, and to erase possible personal assumptions. Hence extra tools have to be relied on, namely reports and literature by other researchers, news articles and google street view to give a wider spectrum on top of the observations done on site. It is also challenging to organise and visualise the observations of urban informalities as the process of categorisation can easily be generalisation and elimination of the diversity of the informal activities. It is also not easy to distill and translate research into design. Somewhat the spatial interventions design are based on the existing creative use of space conducted by the street vendors, as we as designers still do not possess their intellect and experience of street vending. Even though it is a product of research and design, it remains a catalogue of organisation for informal behavior and giving limited new insight.

Landscape as palimpsest

The layered history and the cultural heritage valuation approach of the Shared Heritage Lab corresponds to the idea of landscape as palimpsest, that consists of continual development and interpretations. This perspective is essential in the thesis in order to understand the context through historical events of different attributes as well as evaluating the core values of the city. Being unfamiliar to the context, Semarang seems to be a place of a lot of mysteries. A lot of informal and out-of-place activities are happening, but it is often possible to trace back the story behind. Hence, there is never ending research into understanding the context, the people and the social-economical dynamics. Even though the research mainly focuses on the phenomenon of street vending, there are always more to discover especially during the design process. Therefore, it is a process of continual condensation of research, with valuation and selection of what are of importance, from the broad evolutionary mapping in the beginning towards a more focused research on the palimpsest.

Landscape as scale-continuum

Landscape as spatial-visual perception.

Researching and designing across scale is a very important pillar of landscape architects, because the systems work in different scales as well. The cultural landscape system has greatly shaped the urban phenomena in the city of Semarang. Therefore as landscape architects it is important to zoom in and out from time to time during research to understand these phenomena. For instance the relationship between the watershed and the unfavourable condition of the Kali Semarang, and in the case of street vendors, it is also crucial to understand them from a macro scale of network, but also from a micro scale of spatial vending qualities. Conventional solution to informal vending activities is to build market buildings and confine street vendors within. However such a solution does not consider the signature mobile nature of street vendors. Street vendors are individual micro-powers but they should at the same time be considered as a network, since they largely depend on the strategic vending locations, varying from different time of the day. It is indeed difficult to control human behaviour especially when street vendors are considered as individuals. Although there are preferences in common, they have individual values and habits after all. However when they are considered as a network, it is to understand street vendors are actors, that are actually also a physical flow in the city, shaped by the environment. The source of products, the spots to store vending assets, where the customers are, where the space and trees are, etc are few of the analyses done in the research that shape where do the vendors go. Hence, it is necessary to tackle the issue of street vendors from a network and masterplan level, which current practice often neglects. Nonetheless the eye-level interventions are also important as they have the direct influence towards the users, and that is designing from the visual-spatial perception of street vendors and their consumers. Hence, it is essential to research and design on varying scales in order to manage the street vending activities.

Landscape as ecologic, economic and social process.

Last but not least, the project has strong professional and social relevance. On the professional scope, it is always a reflection on how to include the “less decent” group into the design process and allow flexibility for informalities. The informal sector and the street vendors exactly challenge the design practice, with their high versatility and mobility. As quoted for the spatial catalogue design, the streetscape is composed of three dimensions of activities, fixed, floating and fleeting. While conventional design and the market building solution falls in the fixed dimension, street vendors are actually fleeting actors in the city. In fact in this fleeting dimension, the importance is put on the space and the freedom of movement, instead of the physical and formal design. Perhaps minimal interventions are needed to cater for the fleeting dimension, but it is also the most challenging one to create conditions for freedom instead of constraints. Design is a process of formalisation but it is also about creating conditions for certain valuable cultures to thrive.

On the societal level, there are a lot of problems in the developing city of Semarang that with mere landscape interventions would not help solving all. However, if street vending is something that is highly valued by the people and the government, it can be a catalyst for Semarang to be developed into a livable city. Especially on the issues of lack of open spaces and trees, as well as the poor sidewalk conditions and low walkability, are factors that should be concerned if Semarang has to be developed into a street-vendor-inclusive city. Furthermore, Urban informalities and street vendors booming are concurrent in other developing countries. The thesis could be a proposal to the Semarang government on where and how to develop a more inclusive city, as a test case to research on how the informal group can be organised with a more humane approach through landscape planning and design, and further to the empowerment of such grassroots entrepreneurship in different contexts of the world. There are still a lot of urban dilemmas and conflicts towards such socialist approach, but I believe that landscape architecture should never be a defensive tool for urban governance.

Street vendors booming is a phenomenon shown in the process of capitalist development, who are never potent enough to compete with big corporations. Street vendors empowerment is not just about local culture and tastiness; it is an opportunity for grassroots entrepreneurship, it is a battle against gentrification, it is a safeguard to a liberal and dynamic economy. While cities are developing towards a more organised and civilised way, these vulnerable values should not be compromised.