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Is It Brutalism or Critical Regionalism in Taiwan? On the Dissemination of Architectural Discourse and the Re-imagination of Works of Architect Xiu, Zelan

Yin, Pao-Ning^{*1}

¹ Associate Professor, Graduate School of Arts Management and Cultural Policy, National Taiwan University of Arts, Taiwan

Abstract

This essay has focused on Xiu Zelan's early works during 1960-1970, placing emphasis on Taiwan's historical development of modernization in the 1960s. This is a crucial phase in terms of how professionals strive to import the knowledge and techniques of modernist architectures, while being eager to include local historical and cultural roots into their architectural practice. Through Xiu Zelan's works, we can observe greater varieties: the Chung-Shan Great Hall took a Chinese traditional palace as its blueprint; the Church in St. Viator Catholic High School infuses both the traditional and modernist codes; as well as the pioneers of the contemporary modernist architectures such as the library at Yilan Senior High School and the science museum at WuFeng Elementary School. Styles of western modernist architects such as Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier, and Oscar Niemeyer can be observed. The latter two had a sense of brutalism which can also be recognized in Xiu's works, attempting to break through the current modernist confinement. In other words, this is a process of modernist architectures entering Taiwan - which is not a blind imitation of western countries, but possesses the meaningful resistance of local cultures - which can then be viewed as the professional realization of the critical regionalism by Frampton.

Keywords: brutalism; critical regionalism; cultural resistance; Architect Xiu, Zelan; post-colonialism

1. Introduction

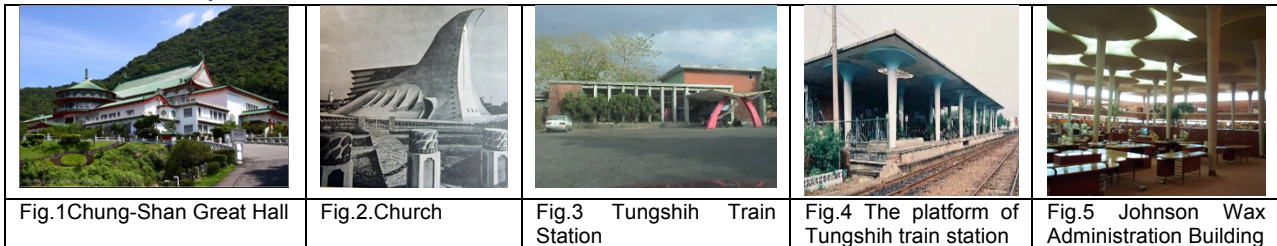
Modern architectural movement became a dominant discourse and disseminated worldwide since the 20th century. Taiwan, during the Japanese colonial period, faced its colonial modernization, and turned into the territory of The Republic of China (ROC) after World War II. However, because of the American Aid, not only did the loans help to recover the country, but also made the country lean heavily on the USA, both physically and ideologically. The modern architectural education and practice was introduced into Taiwan in almost the same period. The urgent pace of industrialization, urbanization, and modern construction made the landscape change dramatically. Like other countries, the ROC-made modern architectures became the dominant landscape in cities, and the traditional and vernacular buildings gradually vanished. Meanwhile, the rapid modernization during the 1960s-1970s meant progress and civilization in essence, and became a dreamland for all society. The new, modern architectural style conveyed their dream towards utopia, being the USA, as many architects were eager to follow the modernist styles to pursue these dreams.

Nevertheless, there were still professionals who worked hard and intended to resist the invasion of total modernization, and tried to localize the technology change into the native culture. Architect Xiu was one of them. Two of the most impressive architectures she designed were the Chung-Shan Great Hall (Fig.1) and a pigeon-shape church (Fig.2) in a Catholic high school. The Great Hall was of a traditional Chinese Palatine style Hall to symbolize the power of President Chiang Kai-shek. The church usually juxtaposes with the Chapelle Notre-Dame-du-Haut de Ronchamp designed by Le Corbusier, a brutalism style of work in Taiwan.

* **Contact Author:** Pao-Ning Yin, Associate Professor,
National Taiwan University of Arts,
e-mail: ning@ntua.edu.tw

Yet, according to the architect Xiu, the shape of the church came from the ship-like form above the Yuan River beside her hometown in Mainland China. She also mentioned that, because the form came from her homeland, which meant protection and safety, similar to when her mother stayed beside her. She took it as a metaphor of the Love from God, and also to transform her homesickness. That is, it was the built form, an interpretation of architectural brutalism or a representation of the critical regionalism described by Frampton?

In the article, taking Architect Xiu and her works as a case study to investigate the process of architectural modernization during the 1960s-1970s in Taiwan, from the viewpoint of the local cultural resistance. To comprehend how the architectural discourse was disseminated, transformed, and resisted at the same time. Namely, to review how the modernization of the architectural practice and traditions were met, and how the struggle, compromise, and the balance was finally reached, or it's still considered as an endless battle we have to continually face.



2. Critical Regionalism

There is no critical regionalism without regions. Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre first used the term "critical regionalism" (Tzonis and Lefaivre, 1981), and Kenneth Frampton elaborated it more with a slightly different meaning (Frampton, 1983).

Critical Regionalism is not a commonly understood regionalism referring to the local architectural tradition, and not being derived from the archetypal sentiments, or from direct opposition to modernism. Its philosophy roots go back to the of phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, developed by French theorist Paul Ricour, and its theoretical basis was formulated in the works of Norwegian architect Christian Norberg-Schulz: "Intentions in Architecture" (1963) and "Genius Loci - Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture" (1980), as well as in the essay "Towards a critical-regional" by Kenneth Frampton. The idea of critical regionalism is to seek answers to the question raised by Paul Ricour: "How to be modern and to continue the tradition, how to revive an old dormant civilization as part of a universal civilization."

In the early 20th century came the intellectual movement of Modernism, which was all about rationality, logic, and efficiency. Slogans like "less is more" and "form follows function" originated in this era of design. In the field of architecture, all forms of ornamentation were seen as wasteful, decadent, and generally useless - and so they were removed, stripping down the building to their bare essentials.

This style became known as the International Style, because it was generic and universal, and could be built anywhere regardless of context. After Modernism settled into the mainstream and the International Style became the dominant architectural style throughout the world, a new school of thought emerged as a reaction to this monotony: Postmodernism. This new movement celebrated the ornament as being essential to architecture, and postmodern designers freely combined decorative elements from all eras and styles to create chaotic, colorful, and whimsical buildings.

As Postmodernism became more popular, people began to realize that these crazy chaotic postmodern buildings were often extremely oatentatious Therefore, a third school of thought emerged: Critical Regionalism. The basic goal was to find a middle ground between these two extremes. While the modernists strived to create a place-less "universal" architecture with the International Style, critical regionalists insisted that the building must reflect the culture and tradition of its region through its design and materials. While the postmodernists celebrated ornamentation for its own sake, critical regionalists insisted that stylistic flourishes

must only be applied in a measured and meaningful way.¹

Frampton, in his essay, argued that it was "critical to adopt" universal values of modernism, taking into account the geographical context of the building. Frampton does not want to refer directly to "folklore", but to the climate, light, topography, and the "local tectonic form", which should be understood as historical and the geographical conditions of the construction industry.

Postmodern debate with modernism is a discussion with abstract functionalism, that is, with international style. The text of Frampton shows that modernism is a dual-layer phenomenon, consisting of some acceptable philosophy of progress (including social and technological issues, as industrialization and standardization), and a formal manner. In this perspective, critical regionalism should be treated as a "reformed modernism" and perhaps most importantly - they have not forgotten that these countries are autonomous regions.²

In sum, critical regionalism is an approach to architecture that strives to counter the placelessness and lack of identity of the International Style, but also rejects the whimsical individualism and ornamentation of postmodern architecture. The ideas of critical regionalism seek to provide architecture rooted in the modern tradition, but tied to a geographical and cultural context. Critical regionalism is not simply regionalism in the sense of the vernacular architecture. It is a progressive approach to design that seeks to mediate between the global and the local languages of architecture.³ Critical Regionalists thus hold that both modern and post-modern architecture are "deeply problematic" (Frampton, 1983).

According to the aforementioned concept, the works of Architect Xiu might be interpreted as a critical regionalism practice in Taiwan, as both tried to reflect the local cultural and historic context, meanwhile, introducing some new material and skill under modern construction, especially on the tectonic level.

3. The Professional Practice of Architect Xiu

Miss Xiu Zelan was born in Hunan Yuanling, in 1925. She graduated from the Department of Architecture of the Central University in Nanjing. She started her career at the Taiwan Railways Administration in 1949. In 2003, she was invited to lecture in ZhiHai, Guandong Province, and unfortunately passed away in 2016.

During her employment at the Taiwan Railways Administration, she was in charge of the design of many train station buildings, staff dormitories, and employee training centers. In Xiu's own words, the job at the Taiwan Railways Administration was monotonous while lacking challenges. In 1956, she left her job, and started an Architects firm with her husband. It happened to be the period of Post-war revival and restoration in Taiwan - of which many public constructions desperately needed professionals to engage in. Xiu had embarked on many constructions when the country was in need of professionals. In point of fact, she was deeply involved in the historical moments of modernization in the late 1960s. According to available resources, she also had an abundant amount of architectural masterpieces in terms of school architectures, leisure activity centers, and churches. In addition, she put her experiences from Europe and the United States into practice, as she had invested in the first ever suburban community "New Garden Village". As a pioneer, it delivered the concept of importing a modernized community, bringing Taiwan towards the social evolution of a modernization development.

4. Some Case Studies of Architect Xiu

4.1. Tungshih Train Station (1959-)

¹<https://www.quora.com/What-is-Critical-Regionalism-in-architecture-And-what-are-some-examples-of-its-application>

² <http://www.historiasztuki.com.pl/kodowane/003-02-05-ARCHWSP-REGIONALIZM-eng.php>

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Critical_regionalism#cite_note-1

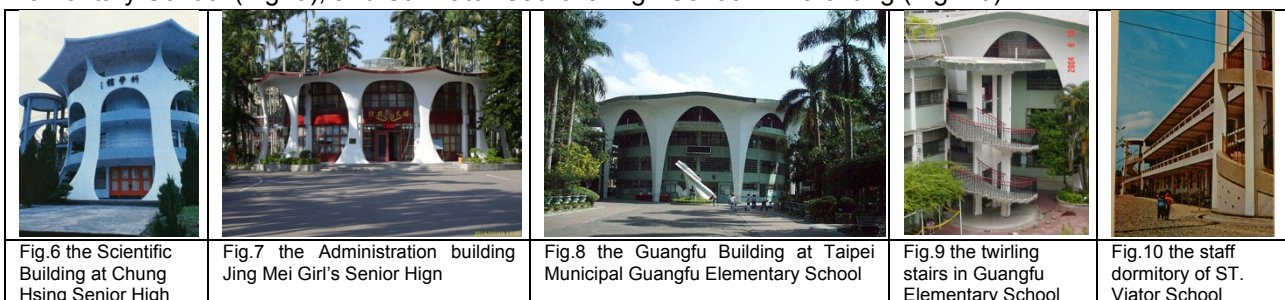
Tungshih Train Station was opened in 1959 financed by the US aid funds. The architecture designated the station as its main structure, with a linear-island platform and entry corridor (Fig. 3). The main structure and the platform created a squared-box structure - the former had a design of red bricks along with grayish white concrete as the pillar and floors; while the latter had the original colors of concrete along with a glass windowsill. These squared-box structure and promotion accurately demonstrated the components and characteristics of Modernist architecture - the bare decoration and simplicity of having horizontal and linear structures, geometry rules, red brick, reinforced concrete, and glass windowsills. The entry corridor possesses a watershed in the form of foldings and is tilted on the sides, supported by two parabola pillars bending inwards. This allowed for a single-story geometric station with simple functions to perform dramatic tension, as well as acting as the decoration for the entire architecture. As Modernists strive for simplicity, the platform also possess such characteristics. In the originally linear yet boring platforms, it adopted mushroom-like pillars with widened top and slimmer bottoms, creating a lively scene. It is also a rare vocabulary in modern architectures in Taiwan (Fig. 4). This is in analogy with the lily pads structure within the Johnson Wax Administration Building (1939) (Fig. 5). The interesting design-thinking pathways of Xiu Zelan can be observed in such details. The design is to enhance the performance and decoration of a simple architecture, or to challenge the base of reinforced concrete, replacing the metal-structured system - which has created another thoughtful and interesting topic.

Xiu Zelan has cleverly connected the volume in this case. On the one hand, she has demonstrated the simple idea of volume in modernization, yet on the other hand, adopted the dramatic watershed and lily-pad designed pillars, paying tribute to the icon of modernism, Frank Lloyd Wright. She also playfully portrayed the criticism of the overly-simple volume of modernism, while trying to make changes using the folded rooftops at the entry corridor, thereby recreating the traditional Chinese ceremonial entry. However, the sense of authority has been tilted, since it lacks the symmetrical axis structure and uses red bricks. In other words, she has adopted the volume elements featuring reinforced concrete and the glass windowsill preferred by modernists as well as local material and architectural vocabularies.

4.2. The Scientific Building at National Chung Hsing Senior High (1959-1999)

In order to divert the population that was massively concentrated into the Taipei region, Chung Hsing New Village was established in 1956 - since it was located in the geological center of Taiwan - as the Taiwan Provincial Government. It imitates the concept of a New Town in the United Kingdom, aiming to permeate throughout Taiwan. The blueprint of the New Town included setting up "schools" - therefore the National Chung Hsing Senior High was the crystallization of such a concept. The Scientific Building was built in 1959.

This four-story building consisted of reinforced concrete that was curvy: section was round, with a hexagon rooftop similar to a curvy canvas cut, as well as an expanded concrete thin shell. In addition to the demonstration of the techniques of the architecture in design, the design ingenuity of Xiu can also be observed (Fig.6). Judged from the constructed timing, the scientific building had been the first attempt for Xiu Zelan at rounded buildings and twirling stairs. Such volume and method can be further seen in the Jing Mei Girls' Senior High (Fig.7) (1962), and the Taipei Municipal Guangfu Elementary School (Fig. 8) (1964). As for the twirling stairs, this style was also adopted at the Guangfu Building at the Taipei Municipal Guangfu Elementary School (Fig. 9), and St. Viator Catholic High School in Taichung (Fig. 10).



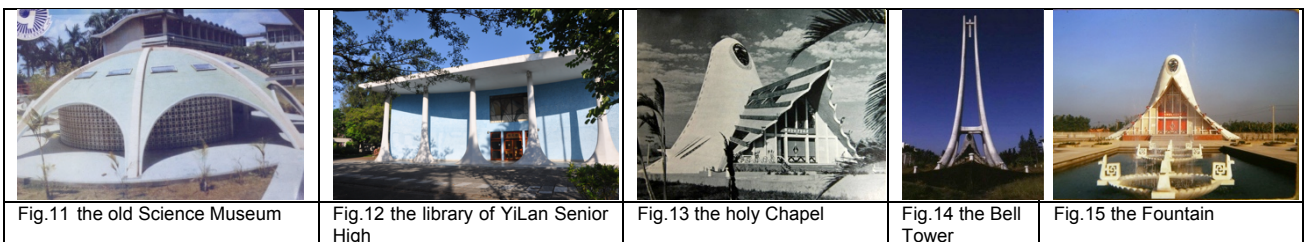
4.3. The WuFeng elementary school (1960-) and the old Science Museum

Wufeng Elementary can be traced back to the “WuFeng Public School” in 1898, which has expanded ever since the colonization of Japan and the postwar era. In 1959, a flood severely destroyed Taiwan, with overseas Chinese donating huge amounts of money, and assisting with the rebuilding of the schools. Xiu Zelan was invited to design the reconstruction by the Minister of Education. The concept adopted was “form follows function”. In September, 1964, the school building and dormitories were completed and opened for usage. In 1965, it was assigned as the provincial “countryside model school”, being the perfect spot for visiting trainees. It was said that there used to be visitors every day to see what a “modern” elementary school might become.

WuFeng Elementary suffered great damage from the 921 Earthquake, in 1999. The old science museum was the only building retained for the School History Museum, while other parts of the school were completely reconstructed. The sphere-shaped architecture (Fig. 11) established in 1964 - often nicknamed the “UFO” by students - was the only Science Museum in the elementary school. Its unique design and the astronomical map on the interior which can be manually controlled has contributed to the historical value of the campus architecture. This architecture is cylindrically centered, and covered with the umbrella-formed rooftop structures. The center cylinder volume is created with glass lattice windows, printed with textures created by concrete tiles. Yet, through the light support similar to an umbrella’s structure and the extremely thin roof top layer, this entire building possesses a lissome sense and endured the threat of an earthquake.

4.4. The Gallery of School History in YiLan Senior High

Established in 1947 at the YiLan Senior High, Xiu was invited to design the new library in 1961. The most impressive feature of this architecture is the convex opening of the front wall (Fig. 12). Painted in a sky-blue color, it contrasted with the white roof top and pillars, creating an impressive façade. The front entrance has doors and windows of the same size, while the window has the colorful mosaic glass as if announcing the location of the entrance at the front wall. Another attraction are the six pillars supporting the rooftop out front. With a reversed funnel shape, it is the opposite when compared with the pillars on the platforms at the Tungshih Train Station, which has become one of the special features of this architecture. Since the completion of the third generation library in 1992, this building became the Gallery of School History from 2012 until today.



4.5. The Church in St. Viator Catholic High School in Taichung (1966-1983)

The St. Viator Church designed by Xiu was edgy. The Thin shell on the outside was constructed with thin concrete - which some described as being similar to that of a resting pigeon, the tilted rooftop acting as the tail, the water drop decorated windows on the side are the wings of the pigeon, and the back is the lower part of the bird’s head. With the hollowed cross as the axis, the light diverted inside reflects a shadow of the cross. This can also be seen in the “Church of the Light” (Ibaraki Kasugaoka Church) created by Tadao Ando. During an interview, Xiu pointed out that the design concept of the church took the blueprints of the Black Awning Boat on YuangJiang (Yuang River) in her homeland, with the “Black Awning Boat” as a symbolization of stability, sanctuary, and protection. On the one hand, this is in memory of the hometown warmth; while also taking it as a metaphor, as in the protection of the religion. The school and the church stress that the boats on the river are similar to that of the Biblical ark, as they both symbolize protection.

This work is highly sculptural, with a strong tension in vision. It has created aesthetic senses and distance with a majestic feeling, yet was often questioned regarding its originality since it somehow echoed the styles of Oscar Niemeyer and The Chapel of Notre Dame du Haut in Ronchamp, in terms of its heavy volume created by the concrete and the dramatic effects after translucence. However, in terms of its floor plan, the St. Viator Church can be divided into three parts: the Bell Tower at the entrance, the youth center, and the church. From the Bell Tower (Fig. 14) to the fountain (Fig. 15), and towards the body of St. Viator Church, there are a lot of vocabularies used that highly stress the traditional cultural elements of China - such as road lamps, fountain decoration sculptures, and youth center textures - which has created a unique interpretation of Catholicism aggressively attempting to fit into the local culture. On the other hand, this can be seen as Xiu's attempt at localizing the Catholic architectures as well as combining with traditional cultural elements. In other words, ever since the Middle Ages, Christian Churches have been marching towards the floor plan mode of a rational rectangle of a Basilica Cross; while Xiu adopted a curvy surface to arrange the ceremonial interior. In addition to the dramatic and sculptural façade of the church, the interior has been filled with a surprisingly spatial experience and ceremonial effects. With the dramatic spatial effects of the lights permeated from the glass windowsills, it has echoed the Gothic Churches - creating a sense of penetration with the glass windowsills, achieving the veneration effect of the apocalypse light and the communication with God. The aesthetic experience created by the architecture and its interior has been converted into the sacred feelings towards the religion.

5. Conclusion

Xiu Zelan unfortunately passed away in the early part of 2016. In order to appreciate her efforts to the Chung-Shan Great Hall which possesses the majestic Chinese Palace design, she evolved presented with a certificate of gratitude at the 50th year anniversary establishment. This also triggered a refreshed concentration towards Xiu Zelan and her professional practice.

This essay has probed into a discussion focusing on Xiu Zelan's early works during 1960-1970, putting considerable emphasis on Taiwan's historical development of modernization in the 1960s. This is a crucial phase in terms of how professionals strive to import their knowledge and techniques of modernist architectures, while being eager to include local historical and cultural roots into their architecture designs. Through Xiu Zelan's works, we can observe prodigious varieties: the Chung-Shan Great Hall located in the Yangmingshan National Park, and the Sun Moon Lake Teachers Hostel that took a Chinese traditional palace as its blueprint; the Church in St. Viator Catholic High School in Taichung that infuses traditional architectures and modernist architectures; as well as the pioneers of contemporary modernist architectures such as the library at Yilan Senior High School and the science museum at WuFeng Elementary School. Styles of western modernist architects such as Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier, and Oscar Niemeyer can be observed. The latter two had a sense of brutalism which can also be identified in Xiu Zelan's work, attempting to break through the current modernist confinement. Simply stated this is a process of the modernist architectures entering Taiwan - which is not a blind imitation of western countries, but rather possesses the meaningful resistance of local cultures - which can be viewed as the professional realization of the critical regionalism by Frampton.

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