

The glamorous, but doomed, bamboo forest:

The Western de/construction of local memory of the 921 Earthquake in Taiwan

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On 21 September 1999, an earthquake measuring 7.3 on the Richter scale rocked the central part of Taiwan, killing approximately 2,400 people and severely damaging infrastructure. To locals, the event is known as the 921 Earthquake.

In 2003, following rehabilitation of much of the area, an international competition, for a built-operate-transfer (BOT) project to commemorate the dead, was instigated. It attracted 182 entries from 34 countries. That submitted by Tsai-Ho Cheng, a 23-year-old Amsterdam-trained, Taiwanese woman architect, who was allegedly inspired by the bamboo forests in Ang Lee's acclaimed movie *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), was selected. Cheng's monument and bamboo forest were realized and the memorial was much celebrated in architectural circles.

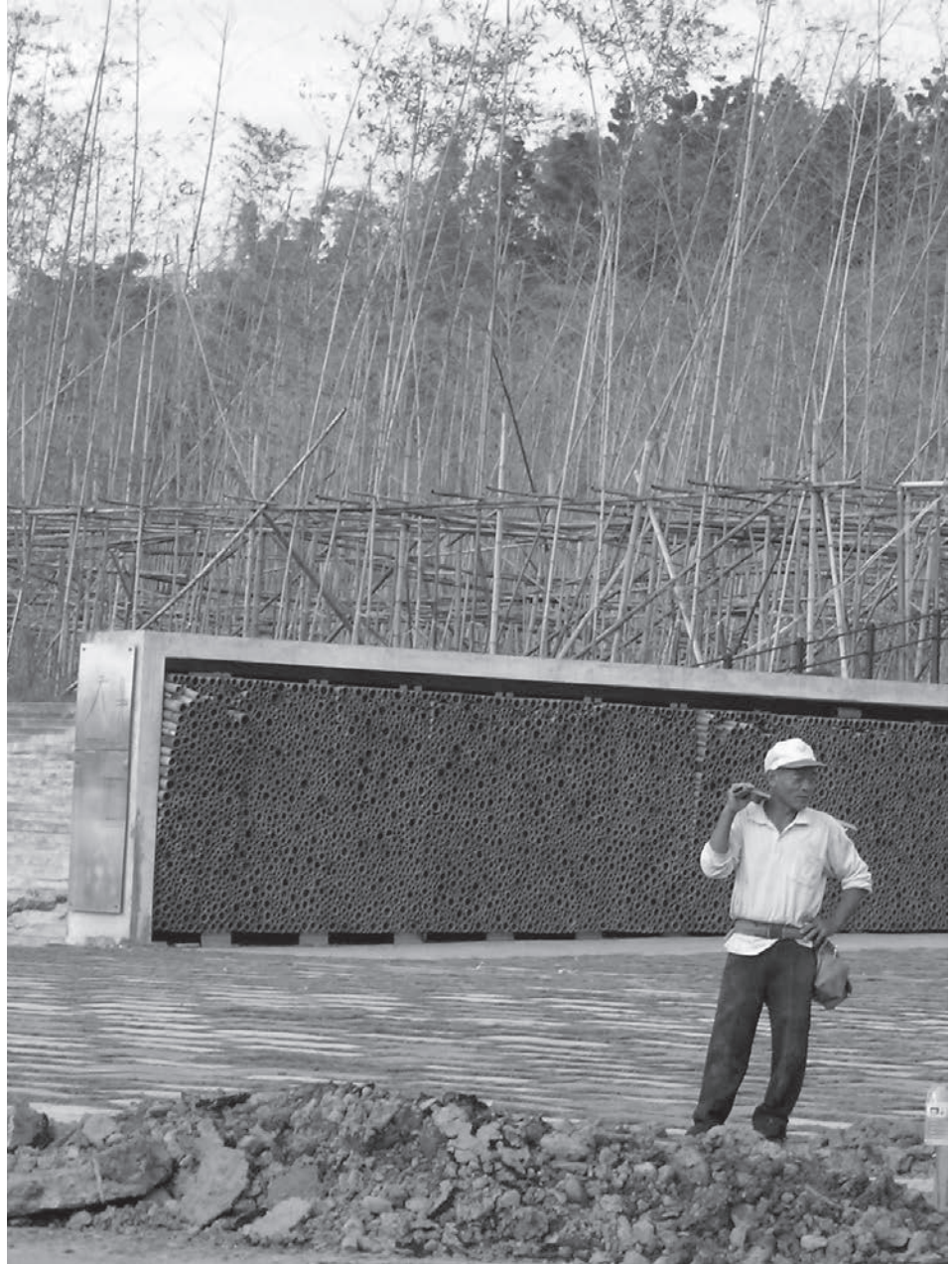
However, local residents reacted against the scheme, lamenting it as a disjuncture, bizarre and surrealistic. They predicted that the bamboo forest would not grow on the site chosen for the memorial. Consistent with their predictions, after one year, the leaves on the trees in Cheng's bamboo forest started turning yellow. The agricultural department diagnosed a mysterious disease in the trees and, within two years of the installation, almost all the bamboo had died. After a series of appraisals, the local government decided to demolish the entire forest; it was removed from its site in 2007.

Chiu-Ping Yang, senior local correspondent for the *China Times*, summarized the events thus:

I saw an incredibly brilliant idea mesmerizing global and local architects, who, subsequently, led everyone marching into a dead valley, as predicted by the local residents (Pers. comm. Chiu-Ping Yang to the author, 2007).

The emotional dissatisfaction of locals was never mobilized into an open protest; anger was eventually calmed and after the clearance of the bamboo forest, residents gradually came back during their leisure time and reclaimed the public space. On a sunny day, people run and play Frisbee on the newly "renovated" lawn, teasing each other about the enormous expense of this piece of lawn. "It is a new start," a local resident commented as he was walking with bare feet on the lawn.

In contrast to the design, the leaves of bamboo forest withered, turning yellow. While Cheng found her project poorly executed, the contractor attributed the failure to an inappropriate planting methodology and a poor choice of species. Photograph by Chiu-Ping Yang.



This paper explores the multiple, dialectic, global processes through which the local memory of the 921 Earthquake collides with the internationally endorsed memorial landscape BOT project. The paper considers juxtaposition and collusion between the global and the local, attempting to illuminate how the political, economic and aesthetic agents wove multiple institutional processes into a doomed contemporary memorial landscape project. The paper relies on historical testimonials and documents as well as interviews with local residents, community leaders and local reporters in Nantou. Efforts to interview several key informants were unsuccessful: the local architects who had endorsed the project allegedly wanted to “keep it in low tone” and “let go of it”. As a result, it was not possible to include their reflections on the project or its failure.

The 921 Earthquake and the Bamboo Forest Memorial Park

The 921 Earthquake was Taiwan’s first national experience of this kind of natural disaster. In the aftermath of the quake, to facilitate a rapid return to normalcy, immediate efforts, both public and private, focused on sheltering the displaced residents and restoring local economic activity. Two main parties were involved in the initial reconstruction: central government and NGO-affiliated voluntary agencies. However, the two have been involved in a longstanding struggle: the centralized public sector programmes are resourceful but inefficient; while the



The bamboo planting expert examining the withered leaves, before concluding that the trees were suffering from a mysterious disease. Photograph by Chiu-Ping Yang.

NGO-affiliated sector reacts more efficiently to local needs but is poorly funded (Shieh & Chang, 2005). The 921 Earthquake Recovery Foundation (ERF) was established to develop a coherent approach to addressing the gap between the two sectors. The 921 ERF was proactive in planning for post-disaster recovery management to establish critical priorities and objectives, traceable milestones, essential leadership and community commitment for recovery (Shieh & Chang, 2005).

By 2003, most of the reconstruction work had been accomplished and the 921 ERF agreed on a plan to construct a memorial landscape installation. To terminate, symbolically, the entire recovery project, it began soliciting project proposals from across the world.¹ It is clear that the central government intended to address the meaning of trauma through the installation of a large-scale, internationally recognized and memorable contemporary landscape.

Farrar (2004) has examined sites that commemorate famines, wars, genocides and terrorist attacks, arguing that these sites have often appropriated traumatic experiences to reproduce sovereign power. However, he also believes that these sites are potentially subversive, empowering people to contest nationalism and rethink their relationship to the state. In the same vein, Jordan (2005) analyzed officially designated memorial sites, discovering not only changes and continuities in the forms and contents of public representations, but also the changing relationship among a state, its people and a collection of officially approved objects in urban landscapes (Farrar, 2004; Lennon & Foley, 1999; Gough, 2000).

1. The international BOT project solicited applications on the Internet and thus encouraged architects, landscape architects and designers from across the world to participate. Some of the official event-related documentation remains accessible on the Internet.

The 921 project was intended as a tribute to local residents, whose resilience and endurance had helped them through the traumatic experience of the quake. It exemplifies how the construction of a memorial can function as a site of negotiation entangled with the ongoing creation of historical narratives, official visions, local memories and cultural productions. With this event, the state intended to look for global players in shaping the meanings of an earthquake, resonating seamlessly with its political rhetoric. As an “internationally plugged and diplomatically isolated and unrecognized” state (Gross, 2006), the Taiwanese government initiated such a project to reinvent itself as a global economic and technological agent. In political rhetoric, the important agenda for the independence-inclined government, led by the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), was to assure local and overseas commentators of the substantial legitimacy of the statehood. Over the past decades, the promotion of international economic integration has enhanced economic, technological and social interconnectedness with global players, including foreign states and multinational corporations. The imperative role that the state has played is to democratize, privatize and liberalize Taiwan’s market, in order to attract global capital and become better connected internationally. These practices have been intended not only to sustain economic growth, but also to override the hurdles resulting from diplomatic isolation.

Under this political economic circumstance, the government and other semi-official agents involved in large-scale public construction projects were encouraged to pursue high profile international competitions. The 921 Earthquake Memorial Park was one project well-suited to an international competition. According to the Prime Minister, Hsih-Kuen Yo, “the global participation in creating the memorial park will definitely increase its global visibility and also ease the pains of the victims” (Architect’s Forum, 2004). In order to present the competition as global, the bidding committee was chaired by Peter Walker, an internationally acclaimed architect, who also chaired the 911 World Trade Center Restoration plan. The jury had local as well as international representation.

Celebrating Bamboo: Global Associations

Tsai-Ho Cheng’s competition winning project comprised a monument surrounded by a bamboo forest, complete with small walkways interconnected to enable visitors to walk through it. It was unanimously applauded by the committee (Ding & Yang, 2004). The global celebration was further endorsed by three well-regarded Taiwanese architects, who compared the proposal to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington DC, designed by Maya Lin, another woman architect of Chinese descent. For example, acclaimed Taiwanese architect and member of the BOT bidding committee Prof. Ming-Herng Wang commented: “I see Cheng as an uprising superstar in the field of city planning and design.... She will emerge like the second Maya Lin” (Ding and Yang, 2004). There are similarities between the two monuments: when approaching both, the ground slopes gently downward and the low walls appear to grow out of the earth (Brook, 2006).

The use of bamboo may have seemed like a logical choice to Cheng. In many tropical countries, entire villages, country houses, barns, and other structures share a common natural resource: bamboo. Bamboo is not only a strong and flexible material, it is also aesthetically appealing. In regions vulnerable to earthquakes, bamboo is highly resistant to collapse. The material is easy to obtain and is easily replaced when aged or damaged by weather. In this respect, bamboo is always fresh and affordable (Kakabadse, 2006).

Bamboo also has cultural associations: for example, from the perspective of Chinese elites and intellectuals, the iconography of bamboo is very positive; it is often associated with the integrity of intellectuals; it is both elastic and tough. Along with pine trees and plum trees, bamboo is thought to uphold moral standards in adverse conditions. In addition, the Western imagination often associates bamboo with East Asia or, in this event, with China in particular. This perception is perpetuated by the fact that panda bears live in bamboo trees. This latter association was also understood by Cheng and her fellow architects, who thought of bamboo as charming, lovely and oriental/Asian.

Cheng commented that she wanted her project to capture the mesmerizing charm of the bamboo forests featured in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. In her imagination, the greenness, the breeze and the shivering bamboo leaves would constitute a soothing and comforting landscape to create, symbolically, a sense of resilience and peace. According to one jury member, a particular strength of the project was that it did not passively emphasize the easing of the pain; instead, it rendered hope and encouraged people to look for things to be positive about.² A local agricultural officer who supervised the construction of the bamboo forest recalled Cheng saying that: "Bamboo has strong local presence and the residents should be able to relate well". Further, "the greenness and wind and mist should be loved by the residents" (Pers. comm. the agricultural officer to the author, 2007).³

For Cheng, bamboo also symbolized the central part of Taiwan. She had never visited this part of the island, but she had seen a wide range of landscape photographs of it. She understood the central part of Taiwan to be mountainous and cool.

Mourning Forests: Local Responses

The local dismay towards the bamboo forest emerged long before its demolition, even before its creation. The earliest animosity resulted from the clearance of the locally grown trees that had survived the earthquake:

We lived with the trees, we saw most of them surviving the quake like our friends on September 21, 1999, and we burst into tears. I don't want to... No one has the right to claim their lives brutally, no matter how brilliant the plan is (Pers. comm. local resident to the author).

There were many other reasons why the bamboo forest was not appreciated locally. Firstly, there was a sharp discrepancy between the meanings that elites, intellectuals and Westerners associated with bamboo, and which were shared by the architects and the bidding committee, and those that were understood by

2. The juror, an acclaimed architect, is reported to have said this in an interview with a local reporter from the *China Times*.

3. The local agricultural officer was responsible for communication between the architect, the government and the contractor. Although reluctant to speak on behalf of the government, the officer said that the methodology of plantation had been modified several times to adjust to the local weather, land and temperature. During the process, every party was unhappy.

4. Ying literally means chilly and ghost haunting. Local residents feel that too many trees would negatively affect their Fung-Shui. In this particular case, a bamboo forest is intimidating because it can link to the dead, whose ghosts are unwilling to leave due to the unaccomplished mission.

local residents. For locals, bamboo signifies “cheapness and low-maintenance” (author’s interviews with locals, 2007). The local appreciation for bamboo is functional and instrumental: they like to eat and drink bamboo shoot, they want to buy bamboo furniture, but they do not in any way enjoy its presence in a large scale park. The local reaction to the bamboo forest was summarized thus:

What we need is a space where people would walk in, but the bamboo forest looks Ying⁴ (chilly). My feeling about a bamboo forest since my childhood has been ghost haunting. A few bamboo trees in my garden are romantic, but a bamboo forest is too intimidating. We dare not approach, not to mention our children” (Pers. comm. local resident to the author).

Another challenge that confronted locals was the transplantation, rather than plantation, of bamboo trees. The plan the local bamboo growers were required to follow was beyond the terrain with which they were familiar. Local wisdom, not requiring an expert on bamboo, states that, generally, bamboo should not be transplanted. Bamboo is allegedly tough, but it usually takes time to grow shoots. However, in Cheng’s proposal, the concept of a “forest” was essential; to achieve an immediate forest-like installation required transplantation. From the perspective of professional local bamboo growers, transplantation was vulnerable and virtually unattainable in the typhoon season.

The difficulty of transplantation was exacerbated by the heterogeneous geography of the central part of Taiwan: “The site for the bamboo forest planting is dry and hot, whereas the site imagined by Cheng, and probably by the internationally acclaimed judges, was high up in the mountains, constantly saturated with fog and a cool breeze” (author’s interviews with locals, 2007). Conflict was exacerbated when a typhoon swept across the region and a gardening contractor went bankrupt due, in part, to the high maintenance work required during the typhoon season. He lamented that the bamboo forest seen in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* was impossible to grow in the area. As another resident said:

I see it as an expansion of the graveyard constructed in my neighbourhood. Somewhat creepy. ... we used to take a walk in the field, but now the entire field is abandoned. Idiots know bamboo can’t grow in the way they prescribe. You can just randomly ask a resident here (Pers. comm. local resident to the author).

It transpired that Cheng’s decision to use bamboo might have been more realistic if the forest had been planted at a higher altitude.

The discrepancy between the global and local is further apparent in local folklore: a bamboo forest is frequently depicted as a place where ghosts and snakes mischievously hide in preparation for an attack on the innocent. It is a common belief that those who die of a natural disaster will not accept their fate, but haunt a forest, reluctant to leave. The ghosts harboured in the forest suffer immense anguish and sorrow, and will continue to wander around it as long as their wishes remain unfulfilled: “If each bamboo tree commemorates a death, the atrocity occurs when you kill the dead again. Ironically, it happens here and has reshaped our memories” (Pers. comm. local resident to the author).



Conclusions

This paper, focused on one specific event, has revealed differences between the intellectual and well-meaning agencies that worked to reshape public memories of a natural disaster, and their ill-considered local effects. The bamboo forest's failure demonstrates a lack of vision among the project's decision makers, primarily those in government who promoted global participation and ignored local wisdom, and in doing so compromised this high-profile international installation project.

The project provides grounds on which to reflect more generally on the interplay between the local and the global, a negotiated relationship that underscores a wide range of contemporary issues. It also sheds light upon attitudes towards, and the potential for, the use of renewable material resources in contemporary developments. In the global age, it is foreseeable that global agents will continue to influence the construction of landscapes and public representations, even when these projects are culturally bounded. Despite some good deeds, the BOT is neither a poison nor a panacea. The point is that members of a community must be given the chance to comment, based on past successes, on what constitutes a good solution. It is imperative, in these forms of memorial construction, to capitalize on opportunities to create and strengthen the social network of a community. As advocated by many architects across the world (e.g. Kakabadse, 2006), local wisdom is central to sustainable development. However, at the other end of the spectrum, it is also politically dangerous to depend solely upon local wisdom, which can be clouded by patronage and favouritism scandals. It is communication that is essential: between proponents and opponents; between initiators and converts; between experts and locals; between designers and makers. In the case of the 921 memorial park, such communication may have prevented the failure and subsequent clearance of the internationally acclaimed competition winning design.

*The bamboos being removed from the site. The controversy ends with sorrow.
Photograph by Chiu-Ping Yang.*

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