

Wall, Public Sphere and Chinese Architecture

——Starting from Shenzhen Dafen Art Museum

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Public sphere, as defined by Jurgen Habermas, refers to a field of citizen discourse independent of individuals and the state, which reflects the common interests of a civil society¹. Since Jurgen Habermas's theory was introduced into China in the 1990s, where China's public sphere is has become an important issue in discussions in disciplines such as history, sociology, and political science. This article attempts to contribute to this discussion through a case study of a special element of architecture - the wall. However, the issue that the author focuses on here is not whether there is a public sphere in China, but how it becomes a competitive arena for various social forces to compete for the right to speak. These competitions are manifested on the wall as an artificial spatial boundary, a medium that can be used for expression, and therefore also as a spatial resource of the city. The role played by the wall in Chinese history, especially in the history of the twentieth century, can provide an excellent annotation for people to understand the fate of China's 'public sphere.' And the starting point of this article's research is the author's observation of Shenzhen Dafen Art Museum in China.

1.

Designed by URBANUS architects, the Dafen Art Museum is located in the center of Dafen Village, Buji Town, Longgang District, Shenzhen, China. In recent years, Dafen Village has become famous at home and abroad due to the reproduction and marketing of oil paintings by local painters living there. At the same time, it has also become a successful case of rural industrial transformation in China. To further enhance the cultural level of the village park, the local government has invested nearly 100 million yuan to build this unique-shaped art palace with an area of 17,000 square meters. The building has three floors in total. The first floor faces the village square and is a place for oil painting exhibitions and sales envisioned by architects. The second floor is a standard art museum occupying half of the total area. It is connected to the square by a ramp. The third floor is a roof garden. On this floor, there are some cube-shaped boxes that are either daylighting shafts for the exhibition halls on the second floor or rentable art studios and coffee houses. The alleys in the middle are passages connecting different blocks of the village, allowing children going to and from school and villagers going shopping on the street to stay in this roof garden.

Since its completion in 2007, Dafen Art Museum has received high praise from the architectural industry and social media. Among the many awards won by this design

is the 'Best Architecture in China' award granted by Business Week/China and Architectural Record magazine in May 2008. In December of the same year, it was also nominated for the 'China Architecture Media Award' by Southern Metropolis Daily. The nominator, Professor Rao Xiaojun, dean of the School of Architecture of Shenzhen University, highly praised the multiple functions of this building and its positive role in improving the living and cultural quality of the entire community. He said²:

This project has strong practical social significance. Dafen Village has formed a special industrial background with its production and sales of oil painting reproductions. As a government public facility, the art museum attempts to facilitate the intervention of contemporary art from one aspect. The local government wants to adjust the surrounding urban context through this public facility. Functionally, it mixes different functions such as art museums, galleries, businesses, and rentable studios into a whole, and mixes daily life, artistic activities, and commercial facilities into a new cultural industry base.

In fact, the Dafen Art Museum not only has a rather comprehensive functional layout, but its exterior wall design is also highly creative. Except for the west wall that serves as the entrance, some rectangular or square 'patterns' are obliquely arranged on the other exterior walls. According to the architect, these 'patterns' are derived from the building base on the map of Dafen Village. They are the 'projection' of the historical space of the village on this art museum. The architect also envisions that local artists can use these square frames as picture frames and display their works in them, adding the final touch to the final completion of the building³.

The wall design concept of the Dafen Art Museum is worthy of attention because it not only serves as a boundary dividing the internal and external spaces and separating the art exhibition venue from the external village, but also is a medium for local artists to display and express themselves. In the author's opinion, to understand the unique social significance of this wall, it is necessary to understand the relationship between walls and the social development and urban visual culture of modern China. Specifically, it is the utilization, competition, and control of various social forces over walls as a medium-like carrier, public domain, and spatial resource.



Dafen Art Museum (provided by URBANUS)

2.

Walls in Chinese architecture have various forms, such as courtyard walls, lane walls, city walls, and even the 'national wall' - the Great Wall. Their basic meaning is to serve as boundaries separating the inside and outside of spaces. Therefore, the book 'Explanation of Names' 《释名》 compiled during the Eastern Han Dynasty (25 - 220 AD) explains: 'A wall is a barrier, used to shield oneself.' The 'Shuowen Jiezi'《说文解字》 compiled in the same period also quotes language from 'Zuo Zhuan' 《左传》 to explain: 'People have walls to cover up evils.' These explanations undoubtedly emphasize the protective function of walls. However, unlike natural boundaries such as rivers and mountains, walls are man-made objects with artificial forms and interfaces, and thus they also have social characteristics. Mozi (476 or 480 BC - 390 or 420 BC) said, 'The height of palace walls is sufficient to distinguish the etiquette between men and women,' believing that the height of palace walls should be based on the standard of separating men and women as required by etiquette. Professor Chen Zhihua, an outstanding Chinese architectural historian of contemporary times, has noticed that high-walled enclosed deep mansions and chastity archways are two important architectural phenomena coexisting in Huizhou region during the Ming and Qing dynasties. He believes that the closed nature of local residences is not only due to the psychology of Huizhou merchants of not revealing their wealth, but also to prevent the contact and interaction between their families and outsiders when they are doing business outside⁴. Today, in Chinese, 'high walls' and 'red walls' have become symbols of power and hierarchy.

In addition to its spacing function, the wall itself has an important characteristic in that it has a visible outer surface. Therefore, it can become a medium for expression like paper and canvas. In Chinese history, there are numerous examples of using walls as an expressive medium. Stories such as Zhang Sengyao's 'Adding Pupils to a Drawn

Dragon' in the Liang Dynasty (502-557) and Li Bai's 'There is a scene before my eyes but I cannot describe it. Cui Hao has inscribed a poem above.' in the Tang Dynasty (618-907) are all related to this. In China, art forms generated by walls also include murals, wall sculptures, brick carvings, stone carvings, and engraved characters, and so on. The screen wall in traditional architecture is a special wall with expressive functions. In commercial buildings of the Ming and Qing Dynasties, there is also a shopfront design called 'pāi zi.' Its characteristic is to extend the building facade upward with a parapet wall and engrave or hang shop signs and advertisements on the parapet wall.

The Chen Clan Ancestral Hall and Academy in Guangzhou, completed in 1894 (the 20th year of the Guangxu reign of the Qing Dynasty), is an excellent example that fully embodies the medium nature of Chinese architecture. Its decorations adopt stone carvings, brick carvings, wood carvings, pottery sculptures, lime sculptures, copper and iron castings, and colored paintings. The themes include auspicious patterns and historical stories, such as 'many sons, many blessings', 'Hehe Erxian (Two Immortals of Harmony and Union)', 'leading the pack', 'more than enough every year', 'three rams heralding spring', 'Guo Ziyi's birthday celebration', 'the Dragon King and the Eight Immortals paying homage to the Jade Emperor', 'banquet in the Peach and Plum Garden at night', 'returning home in glory', etc., fully conveying the life ideals of the Chen clan and also reflecting the regional and cultural particularities of architecture⁵. This architectural complex also representatively shows that the way of expressing meaning in traditional Chinese architecture mainly depends not on differences in types but on iconic carvings and indexical characters decorated on the exterior of the structural body. Walter Benjamin said: 'Distraction and concentration are diametrically opposed.... Architecture represents an art form, and the public's acceptance of it can be achieved inadvertently.'⁶ In fact, wall decorations and urban public art both have this characteristic.

When walls, as a medium, enter the public domain, they will be connected with state power. The content of wall decorations in traditional Chinese architecture usually includes prayers for a life of good fortune, prosperity, longevity, and happiness and praises for the natural environment, as well as the promotion of Confucian moral ethics and Buddhist and Taoist doctrines. These wall surfaces are the public image or face of the building owners. Therefore, it is hard to imagine that in traditional Chinese society where totalitarian control or the 'disciplinary and punitive' mechanism as described by Michel Foucault is extremely developed, the people could or dared to express any dissatisfaction with state power on the wall surfaces. The 39th chapter of 'Water Margin', 'Song Jiang composes a rebellious poem at Xunyang Tower', is a story of causing trouble due to composing a poem in a public place. It can be said that the relationship between an autocratic society and public walls is the same as its relationship with other public media - that is, monopoly.

The competition for walls has endowed it with richer visual cultural connotations in modern China than in any previous period. For example, in the history of collision and exchange between Chinese and Western cultures, the style of building walls is often a manifestation of cultural identity. In the discourse of nationalism, the Great

Wall - a special wall - is the symbol of the Chinese nation. In the discourse of the Chinese revolution ⁷, 'tuweizi' (a stockaded village with walls made of earth or bricks and stones) is a synonym for the strongholds of reactionary forces. Shi Lu, a modern Chinese artist, in his print 'Overthrow Feudalism' (1949), depicts peasant troops charging into the landlord's manor with high walls standing, which is a vivid manifestation of overthrowing the feudal system. Another artist, Yan Han, also uses the same symbolic technique in his print 'March on the Feudal Fortress' (1948). He even engraved the slogan 'Farmers have their own land' and the notice of 'Outline of the Chinese Land Law' on the wall in the middle ground of the picture, further emphasizing the occupation and utilization of walls by the peasant movement.

In the process of China's modernization, walls have also become the object of transformation due to their closed nature. The demolition of city walls and construction of roads that have been launched in various places since modern times are a complete negation of the shielding function of traditional city walls, fully reflecting what Joseph W. Esherick said: 'The victory of the new concept of economic development over the old understanding that emphasizes safety, and the transformation from controlling the circulation of people and goods to promoting this circulation' ⁸. In the controversy over the demolition and protection of Beijing's city walls after 1949, the main reasons of the demolition faction were also 'city walls are ancient fortifications and have now lost their functions', 'city walls are the relics of feudal emperors' and 'city walls hinder traffic and limit or hinder the development of cities' ⁹. It is no exaggeration to say that in the history of modern Chinese architecture, no other architectural element has the same important social and cultural associations as walls.

The revolutions that took place in modern and contemporary China were to a large extent mass movements that needed to educate, mobilize, and influence the people. Therefore, they most needed propaganda methods that could be close to the people and be easily accepted by the people. The media nature of walls was utilized by various mass movements, creating many 'arts' related to walls, such as slogans, murals, posters, propaganda paintings, wall newspapers, and even big-character posters. Compared with foreign and elitist urban sculptures, they are more convenient and easy to implement, so they have become the most popular 'public art' in modern China. The most important function of these new art forms is to transform a spatial resource into a political resource that can be used to serve politics. Suzhou during the period of the Republic of China (1911-1949) is such an example. In 1928, a tourist commented on its urban transformation like this¹⁰:

The most eye-catching ones are the white letters on the blue background on the wall and the red, blue, and white flags or bright blue and white flags on the roof; Furthermore, no matter where it is - teahouses, taverns, bathrooms, barber shops, or even brothels - in the past, places that hung the slogans 'Heavenly Officials bless the Three Great Stars' and 'Business prospers throughout the world, wealth reaches the Three Rivers' or 'Families celebrate the emperor's favor, longevity is abundant' have been replaced with the two maxims of 'Portrait of Mr. Sun Yat sen' and 'Comrades still need to work hard' left by his elders; Although one can still find phrases such as'

singing and dancing in peace ', ' feeling at home ', and ' purple energy coming from the east ', they are still among the very few.

As a political resource, wall public art is inevitably subject to political intervention. In 1938, artist Zhong Ling wrote a huge slogan in Yan'an that read 'Workers, poor peasants, unite to fight for victory against Japan'. When writing the word 'worker', he felt that the strokes were too few and asymmetrical compared to the adjacent traditional Chinese character 'nong' (farmer). Therefore, he borrowed the writing style of traditional clerical script and wrote the word 'worker' in the shape of 'gong' (工) with two turns and 'ren' (人) with three strokes. During the Yan'an Rectification Movement in February 1942, Mao Zedong delivered a famous speech titled 'Oppose the Eight Elements of the Party'. When talking about the third crime of the Eight legged Communist Party of China, which is 'aimless and not looking at the target,' he mentioned this slogan, saying that it was deliberately not intended for the common people to read, and said, 'It is certain that this comrade was a student of ancient literati, but it is somewhat inexplicable that he had to write it on the walls of Yan'an during the Anti Japanese War'.¹¹ This famous story in the history of modern Chinese art illustrates that in the eyes of politicians, public art must be easily recognizable in form, and any individual artist's performance that goes against this requirement is not worth encouraging.

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China, more professional artists and art enthusiasts were sent to rural areas to participate in activities such as writing slogans and painting promotional murals. In early 1958, the famous painter Gu Yuan and 25 editors and painters from the People's Fine Arts Publishing House went to places such as Zunhua County in Hebei Province and Gaoyou County in Jiangsu Province to paint murals in villages and communities. At the request of the Zunhua County Committee, Gu Yuan drew propaganda murals several meters to over ten meters long based on the slogans of the Great Leap Forward proposed by the county. Changli County in Hebei Province has also organized an art creation team mainly composed of art teachers, folk artists, and club backbones, with a total of more than 2000 people. In half a month, they created more than 65000 murals, becoming a famous 'mural county' in China¹². A poem at that time further described the popularity and social function of murals: 'Socialist new murals, rooted in the new countryside. Farmers love new murals, and every village paints murals. Leap forward carriages, leap forward horses, and everywhere are leap forward paintings. New murals can speak and educate people's hearts towards lighthouses.'¹³ The behavior of these artists and art enthusiasts is a manifestation of the state's occupation of the public sphere in rural society - these murals are not inside temples but on the exterior walls of buildings facing the street, and their themes are not religious deities and legendary stories, but illustrations of national policies. Therefore, whether in spatial form or content, they can be regarded as a revolution in Chinese mural tradition¹⁴.

Another large-scale use of walls in modern Chinese history is the 'big character poster'. It is a widely published text that does not require official approval or represent the will of those in power, making it a tool for free expression by the public. In order to facilitate public viewing, the prominent visual feature of big character posters is 'large',

and they utilize public spaces, especially building walls, in their dissemination methods. The origin of big character posters can be traced back to the mourning activities of the people when Sun Yat sen passed away in 1925. At that time, the 'big character poster' wall composed of slogans and couplets became another important medium for different social groups and even individuals to express themselves spontaneously at Sun Yat sen's funeral, in addition to books and newspapers.

However, the proliferation and climax of big character posters undoubtedly occurred during the Cultural Revolution. On May 25, 1966, Nie Yuanzi, the secretary of the Philosophy Department Party Branch of Peking University, and others posted a big character poster on campus, attacking the main leaders of the University Work Department of the Beijing Municipal Committee of the Communist Party of China and the Peking University Party Committee. On June 1st, Mao Zedong decided to broadcast this big character poster to the whole country through the Central People's Broadcasting Station, praising it as 'the first Marxist Leninist big character poster in the country' and 'the manifesto of the Beijing Commune in the 1960s'. On August 9th, he also announced 16 regulations: 'We should fully use the forms of big character posters and debates to carry out loud speeches.' The big character poster quickly became ubiquitous throughout the country. Finally, at the first session of the Fifth National People's Congress held from February to March 1978, the 'four major conferences' - big voice, big release, big character newspaper and big debate were listed as 'great socialist democracy' and 'people's democratic rights' by the newly adopted Constitution of the People's Republic of China.

Due to the recognition of the highest leaders and the fact that its posting did not require special approval procedures, the big character poster made the wall the most shared spatial resource and 'public domain' in society during the Cultural Revolution. Shortly after the end of the Cultural Revolution, this resource and field quickly became a battlefield for the competition between folk demands and national ideology, as reflected in the rise and fall of the 'Democracy Wall' in Xidan, Beijing. The wall was originally a 2-meter-high and 200 meter long wall on the northeast side of the intersection of Xidan Commercial Street and Chang'an Avenue, the most important east-west avenue in Beijing. Since November 1978, it has been used by civilians to post texts expressing their political views. In November of the following year, the Second Session of the Fifth National People's Congress made a resolution to ban it. On December 6th, the Beijing Municipal Revolutionary Committee issued a notice stipulating that except for posting big character posters in their own units, all big character posters must be gathered in Yuetan Park, and their real names and other information must be filled in. Posting big character posters on Xidan Wall and other places is prohibited. In February 1980, the Fifth Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Communist Party of China believed that the Fourth National Congress did not play a positive role in safeguarding the people's democratic rights, but instead hindered the normal use of democratic rights by the people. In September of the same year, the third session of the fifth National People's Congress abolished the provision in Article 45 of the Constitution that citizens have the right to use loudspeakers, big release, debates, and large character posters¹⁵. The wall, as a

medium for expressing different political views, has lost its legitimacy in China as a result.

Instead of big character posters, there are two other wall media - wall posters and advertisements, whose viewing methods, like other urban public art, aim to indirectly make the public feel 'unintentionally'. Posters are images and text published by the government or officially recognized. Its appearance in urban and rural public spaces in China should have been no later than 1958 when artists went to rural Hebei to paint murals. After the reform and opening up, the most famous official wall poster was probably established by the Propaganda Department of the Shenzhen Municipal Committee of the Communist Party of China, featuring a huge portrait of Deng Xiaoping with the theme of 'Adhering to the Party's Basic Line for One Hundred Years without wavering'. This is an independent wall with an area of 300 square meters, located at the intersection of Shennan Road and Hongling Road in a square with an area of about 14000 square meters ¹⁶. It continues the traditional Chinese architecture of shadow walls, highlighting the public and commemorative nature of the images. More wall posters are either attached to buildings or independent along the street, but they are mostly designed with rainproof glass covers, eaves, and lighting facilities. They provide safety guarantees for display content and convenient conditions for visitors, fully demonstrating the recognition and support of government departments.

Commercial advertising was popular in various commercial cities in China during the first half of the 20th century. But since the 1950s, with the government's socialist transformation of industry and commerce, the planned economy replaced the market economy, and commercial advertisements aimed at market promotion disappeared from public spaces in China. Instead, political slogans, posters, and propaganda posters have been used. With the reform and opening up in the late 1970s and the revival of China's market economy, advertising also reappeared. On January 14, 1979, Ding Yunpeng, 38 years old from the advertising department of Shanghai Advertising Company, published an article titled 'Rectifying the Name of Advertising' in *Wen Hui Bao* (a famous newspaper), stating that advertising was not a 'capitalist business model' and publicly defending it. This article can be regarded as the first horn of the recovery of China's advertising industry, which quickly caused a nationwide response¹⁷.

The dissemination of advertisements depends on the medium. Today, in addition to radio, television and the Internet, the wall of a building is another important medium for advertising. Therefore, wall advertising has become one of the most important contents of China's urban visual culture. Its essence is to transform a space resource into a commercial resource.

The changes in the exterior wall of the Beijing Olympic Hotel, designed by Japan's Kumi Corporation and built in 1988, located opposite the National Library of China in Beijing, highlight this spatial competition. For this building, the author wrote in an introduction to the book '20th Century Chinese Architecture' in 1999 ¹⁸:

The Beijing Olympic Hotel has a simple body shape and a color tone of blue-green. The facade of postmodernism style shows a classical meaning. The bottom two levels

of public rooms form the base on the facade, while the guest room level serves as the wall and the protruding skylight forms the roof. The east and west facades are naturally divided into three sections: left, middle, and right, with windows and solid walls depending on the orientation of the guest rooms. The flat wall utilizes the sloping surface of the window at the end of the corridor to form two grooves on the east and west facades, clearly explaining the relationship between the blocks and the overall relationship is very organic. The pediment of the skylight is gambrel, which is also a traditional vocabulary in Western architecture. The upper notch is reminiscent of the broken pediment on the AT&T Building in New York designed by Philip Johnson. The exterior walls of the building are covered with blue reflective tiles and have standard unit divisions. Each unit has three color tone stripes, forming a horizontal line on the overall facade and implying the location of the floor, as well as the walls above and below the windows. The design of the Olympic Hotel reminds people of a famous quote by Japanese architect Fumihiko Maki: 'The maturity of an architect can be seen from the details'.

Unfortunately, due to poor management and insolvency, the Olympic Hotel was auctioned off in 2003 and transformed into an office building, which was subsequently sublet to different owners. The advertisements currently covering the exterior walls of buildings include: 'China Foreign Exchange Building', 'Kyushu Business Hotel', 'Fujin Tian Restaurant', 'Xiangbin Restaurant, New Xiang Yue Seafood', 'Beijing Roast Duck', 'Zhongyuan Dajing Car Rental', 'Guangdong Tea Market', 'Four Seasons Hot Springs, Professional Foot Therapy', etc. These advertisements are a manifestation of the image of each enterprise, serving their own commercial interests, and the cost of this interest is the original pure and perfect appearance of the building.



Small Advertisements on the Streets of Beijing (Photo by Lai Delin)

Another phenomenon that fully reflects the current urban wall competition is the various 'small advertisements' posted on the streets of Chinese cities. The information spread by these small advertisements is mostly illegal activities such as engraving seals, obtaining certificates, issuing invoices, as well as ambiguous searches for friends and rentals. Their proliferation not only seriously affects the city's appearance, but also causes damage to public facilities, leading to being vividly referred to as 'urban psoriasis' by the general public. But strangely enough, many municipal departments have no intention of tracing the source and eradicating the crackdown according to the contact information provided in the advertisement. They only rely on cleaners to scrape and clean, treating the symptoms rather than the root cause. Their governance efforts are vastly different from strictly prohibiting 'reactionary slogans' ¹⁹. How to deal with advertisements in cities and buildings actually reflects the attitude of urban authorities and property owners towards urban space and building environment, and also tests their ability to control both. These small advertisements seem to tell people that many walls in Chinese urban spaces, although not privately owned, are not legally considered 'public areas'. They seem to lack clear ownership and are in a state of 'three no's'. Local governments do not mind their infringement on the interests of the people (including various illegal constructions and behaviors that encroach on urban sidewalks), and only when they are used to challenge the ideology of the country, these 'public interest representatives' will use authoritarian means to reassert their 'sovereignty' over them.

Since the 1990s, the wall itself has also been a manifestation of the spatial competition in China's urban commercial development boom. The most famous case is the demolition of the south campus wall of Peking University in March 1993. When the school authorities decided to demolish the approximately 600 meters long south wall and convert it into a commercial street, a young student on campus was very radical and said, 'This is a great sadness. From now on, Peking University will no longer have a pure scholar.' However, the deputy secretary of the party committee responsible for real estate development at Peking University responded that the wall pushing was the result of Peking University's 'updating its mindset. According to media reports, whether one wishes it or not, the concept of an ivory tower will disappear here, and Peking University students, who are known for their emphasis on academia and politics, will become associated with a market economy. *Wen Hui Bao* (a famous newspaper) boldly asserted that 'Peking University bid farewell not only to a wall, but perhaps to an era of walls' ²⁰. For architectural and urban historians, the demolition of the south wall of Peking University reproduced the history of the disintegration of the urban neighborhood system and the emergence of commercial streets in Bianliang, the capital city of the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127), due to the development of the market economy since the Sui Dynasty (581-618) and Tang Dynasty (618-907).

3.

Symbolically, the initial rise of contemporary experimental art in China reflects a competition for walls - a public medium, specifically an exhibition space. In 1979, when a group of rebellious avant-garde artists' works were rejected by the National Art Museum of China as the official representative of the art world, they chose the museum's walls as the exhibition venue. This exhibition is called the 'Star Art Exhibition' ²¹. Since then, we have continuously seen contemporary Chinese artists' creations related to 'walls'. For example, Xu Bing's 'Ghost Beats the Wall' (1992) uses rubbings to transform the solidity of the Great Wall into flatness, turning outdoor brick and stone structures into indoor paper and ink installations, and turning a national symbol into a collection of private artists. Black, ink, and white paper not only reveal the oppressive feeling that the Great Wall brings to people, but also dissolve its sacred commemorative significance ²². For example, Song Dong's home is adjacent to the deep courtyard of a senior official. The tall wall reflects the identity and rank of this official, and also blocks all of his secrets from the outside world. Taking inspiration from classical Chinese novels, Song Dong's installation work 'Leaking Secrets' (1995) features a series of cloth bags hanging outside a high wall, with ice cubes symbolizing those 'secrets' placed inside. As time passed, the ice melted and the 'secret' was revealed, creating a strong contrast between the authority represented by the high wall and the emptiness revealed by the ice pack. This work not only questions hierarchy and state power, but also challenges the hegemony behind it. When people discover that the so-called 'secret' is just a pool of water, they cannot help but laugh at the seemingly mysterious high wall.

Currently, walls are also a forefront battlefield for conflicts between the government, real estate developers, homeowners, and residents, making them an important theme in contemporary Chinese art. The artist's vision is to carefully paint and sew on the walls of ancient buildings that have been violently demolished by real estate developers in Beijing, as if performing the final cosmetic surgery for a deceased relative to restore her rightful dignity. Zhang Dali said, 'Many things are happening in this city: demolition, construction, car accidents, sex, alcohol abuse, and pervasive violence... I chose these walls. They are the screens that project the city's performance.' His series of 'graffiti' works are his 'dialogue' with Beijing city, and he has also left his personal mark on the walls as a public domain ²³. Huang Rui's work 'Zhanna' (2007) interprets the English pronunciation of 'China' as 'Zhanna', and vividly showcases the current image of China as a powerful and violent country due to rapid urban land development. In short, the works of these contemporary artists are all based on walls as the starting point of creation, expressing questioning and satire of power through different ways of dialogue with walls, and protesting against the damage caused by commercialism to various historical buildings and public property composed of walls.

In the history of modern Chinese architecture, the exterior walls of many public buildings are still a medium for expressing meaning, but the means of displaying meaning are mostly not the iconic carvings and indicative texts mentioned above, but the styles produced by symbolic elements, such as ethnic style, modernist style, postmodernism style, and European style. These styles undoubtedly embody the

cultural ideals of homeowners. It is worth noting that this pursuit is not only about the initial style positioning of architectural design, but also includes the 'facade renovation' that changes the appearance of the building after completion. Facade renovation is quite common in contemporary Chinese architecture and urban renewal movements, allowing homeowners to adjust their value orientation and regain architectural forms that conform to current aesthetics without making significant changes to the original structure. And the urban authorities are also using this means to rectify the city's appearance and redefine the city's identity and style.

In recent years, there are two concepts in Chinese architectural design that have had a significant impact on the exterior wall effect of buildings: the 'constructivist theory' and the 'skin theory'. They are design concepts indirectly derived from Western works or directly introduced by foreign architects. The former emphasizes the organic and perfect structure and materials, and opposes various additional meanings beyond architecture; The latter emphasizes the autonomy of building exterior walls independent of structural systems, allowing architects to break free from structural constraints and create imaginative and personalized exterior walls. Although the two concepts have different attitudes towards the issue of architectural symbolism, they both adhere to the autonomy of architecture and the architect's understanding and control of the work, opposing users' additions and modifications to the design. Like a work of art, the best condition for such buildings is usually after completion and before use²⁴.

4.

The exterior walls of the Dafen Art Museum emphasize the abstract features of flat composition, rather than the sculptural sense with obvious light and shadow effects. The basic form of a square or rectangle brings unity and a sense of order to the overall composition of the frame, but the variation in box size and skewness add arbitrariness and randomness to this composition. Unlike the exclusion of user participation in constructivist and epidermal theories, according to the architect's expectations, the exterior walls of the Da Fen Art Museum will be a field of government permission, public participation, and interaction and communication between architects and artists, thus reflecting a tolerant and open attitude. Da Fen Art Museum consciously regards itself as a public medium/carrier, actively allowing users and the public to participate and express themselves while expressing themselves.



The Large Relief in the Square of Dafen Art Museum (Photo by Zhang Yun)

Borrowing the concept of art critic Clement Greenberg, the architectural design of the Da Fen Art Museum can be seen as a rather elite form of 'avant-garde art', while oil painting replicas filled by local artists are known as 'vulgar art'. Here, two different forms of art with different tastes will coexist. This relationship is not exclusive or competitive, but consciously regards public expression as an organic part of realizing one's own value. This kind of inclusiveness embodies a Chinese style aesthetic approach, which provides viewers with the possibility of multi-level reception and appreciation. Like the paintings of Zhao Zhiqian and Wu Changshuo from the modern Shanghai School of Painting in China, as well as Qi Baishi from Beijing, their floral feathers and auspicious themes can satisfy the aesthetic taste of the general public. Their pursuit of taste and reference to ancient and vigorous calligraphy are also the goals of elite literati painting. Their paintings do not reject symbolism for the sake of abstraction, nor do they reject abstraction for the sake of symbolism, resulting in a shared appreciation between the refined and the popular. It can be imagined that the evaluation of the appearance of the Dafen Art Museum will also have the same possibility.

The Dafen Art Museum was built in 2007, but on this wall that has become a public medium, the architect's desire for artists to showcase their own works was not realized until August 2010. As part of the official event of the Shenzhen Case Pavilion at the Shanghai World Expo (China Shenzhen Dafen International Mural Invitation Exhibition), 50 domestic and foreign mural artists were invited to create ²⁵. Their works are quite contemporary in style, with content and color tones intentionally highlighting the vibrancy and humor of the common people. However, the overall effect emphasizes a relaxed and lively atmosphere that everyone enjoys. The initial implementation was a relief sculpture on a huge red sandstone retaining wall with an

area of 810 square meters, invested nearly 5 million yuan by the local government and located on the south side of the art museum. The title of the relief is 'A History of Western Art', which is based on the carving and painting of ancient Rome until the early 20th century, specifically the Cubism and Fauvism ²⁶. This is an art history narrative that has been recognized by the Chinese education authorities. Its permanent material, commemorative scale, symbolic color, and even the formal display of the reproduced artworks are in stark contrast to the painting displays on the walls of the adjacent Da Fen Art Museum. It is not difficult to see that the Dafen Art Museum has become a touchstone, as it has witnessed and will continue to verify the degree of openness of a civil society. It will also prompt people to think about who will use the wall as a medium and spatial resource, and even the larger social public sphere, and how it will be used?

Refercenc:

[1] Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989).

[2] The reasons for Rao Xiaojun's nomination can be found in 'Da Fen Village Art Museum (Best Architecture Award Nomination)' (December 1, 2008), Nandu Net, http://nd.oeeee.com/cama/200811/t20081127_921219.shtml.

[3] The author conducted an interview with architect Meng Yan, the main designer of the Dafen Art Museum, on May 21, 2008.

[4] Chen Zhihua: 'Difficult Local Emotions - Villages, Museums, Libraries', *Architect*, 1994, Issue 59, Pages 47-55.

[5] Refer to Huang Miaozhang, editor in chief, and Guangdong Folk Crafts Museum, editing: 'Chen's School' (Guangzhou: Guangdong Tourism Publishing House, 2007).

[6] Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* by Walter Benjamin, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 217-51.

[7] Arthur Waldron, 'The Great Wall Myth: Its Origins and Role in Modern China', *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 2, no. 1 (1988): 67-104.

[8] Joseph W. Esherick, 'Modernity and Nation in the Chinese City', in *Remaking the Chinese City: Modernity and National Identity, 1900-1950*, ed. Joseph W. Esherick (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000),

[9] Liang Sicheng: 'Discussion on the Issue of the Preservation or Abolition of Beijing City Wall', originally published in 'New Construction', Volume 2, Issue 6 (July 1950). Refer to the Complete Works of Liang Sicheng, Volume 5 (Beijing: China Architecture & Building Press, 2001), page 85.

[10] Hu Er: 'Suzhou', 'Contribution', Volume 3, Issue 3 (June 25, 1928), pages 34-48.

[11] Meng Hong: 'Zhong Ling: A Person Associated with the Founding of New China' (October 23, 2009), CPC News Network, <http://dangshi.people.com.cn/GB/85038/10246007.html>.

- [12] Liao Guozhu: 'New Murals and Propaganda Paintings during the Great Leap Forward' (March 24, 2008), Bobao Art Network, <http://news.artxun.com/bihua-698-3488704.shtml>; Jiang Weipu: 'The Past of Lihe Art School in 1958', National Art Museum of China, Issue 1, 2007, pages 107-108.
- [13] Chen Lusheng: 'A History of Art in New China', Volume 1 (Beijing: China Youth Publishing House, 2000), page 67.
- [14] These murals were called 'new murals' at that time. Refer to Liqun: 'The emergence of new murals is a big event', Art, Issue 8, 1958. Quoted from Chen Lusheng: 'History of New Chinese Art Painting', Volume 1, page 65.
- [15] Luo Pinghan: 'Trembling History - The Rise and Fall of Big Character Posters in China' (March 28, 2007), Sina Forum, <http://forum.book.sina.com.cn/thread-1543266-1-592.html>; www.kanzhongguo.com/node/64125.
- [16] Song Yi, Zhou Min, Xue Shijun: 'New Portrait of Deng Xiaoping at Shenzhen Portrait Square' (August 16, 2004), Xinhua News Agency, http://news.xinhua.net/newscenter/2004-08/16/content_1797271.html.
- [17] Editorial Department of this magazine: 'China's Advertising Doors Slowly Open', Xiaokang, Issue 10, 2008, page 61.
- [18] Edited by Yang Yongsheng and Gu Mengchao: '20th Century Chinese Architecture' (Tianjin: Tianjin Science and Technology Press, 1999), page 390.
- [19] On July 31, 2007, one year before the opening of the 29th Olympic Games, the Civil Defense Bureau of Shijingshan District, Beijing, and the '08' Environmental Office of the district jointly held a practical exercise on the external support work of the Laoshan Olympic venue group. 'Demolition of reactionary slogans' was one of the six exercise subjects. The exercise photo shows a riot police officer wearing a steel helmet twisting a young man wearing glasses who appears to have posted a 'reactionary slogan' at a police protected 'crime scene'. Refer to the Shijingshan District Air Defense and Disaster Prevention Information Network, <http://minfangju.bjsjs.gov.cn/gzdt/8a8481cb1415559801141f1d6cd50010.html>.
- [20] Wang Jiahang: 'Why Peking University toppled the commercial street and rebuilt the south wall', Economic Daily, July 12, 2001.
- [21] Currently, some English works translate the Star Exhibition as 'Star Exhibition', but in my opinion, the word 'star' should be taken from Mao Zedong's famous line 'A single spark can ignite a prairie fire', reflecting the firm belief of avant-garde artists in new art.
- [22] Wu Hung, Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 31-34.
- [23] Wu Hung, Making History: Wu Hung on Contemporary Chinese Artists (Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2009), 47-57.
- [24] The objects of facade renovation are mostly buildings that were purely 'functionalist' before the 1980s, but there are also some designs that are not very old and unusual. For example, recently, the School of Architecture at Tsinghua University planned to renovate the facade of the building hall designed by the former dean of the School of Architecture and completed in 1996 before the 100th anniversary of the university in 2011. Refer to the 'Collection of Facade Renovation Plans for Tsinghua Architecture Hall' on the website of Tsinghua University School of Architecture, <http://arch.tsinghua.edu.cn/chs0/>.
- [25] '50 Mural Artists Brush Walls for Da Fen Art Museum', Southern Daily, August 29, 2010.

[26] 'Historical Celebrities' Vividly Interpret Western Art History', Shenzhen Business Daily, May 15, 2008.

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