

Altered Space: Squatting and Legitimizing Treasure Hill, Taipei
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1. The Treasure Hill Story – the present chapter

The Treasure-Hill Settlement (Treasure Hill) is literally a fringe urban village characterized by its intimate physical relations with the Guan-Yin Hill and the Hsin-Dian River. The historical Treasure Shrine for Guan-Yin (Goddess of Mercy) niches herself comfortably a little above the foot of the hill based on the geomancy principles of Feng-shui. The Shrine looks out to the river which used to be so clear that the Japanese colonial government demarcated Treasure Hill and its surroundings as the resource protection area and prohibited any further development and construction within. Back then, there were only military bunkers and wards neighboring the Shrine.

The great retreat of the Nationalist government ushered in an abrupt migration flux to the Capital city, and the shortage of housing supply was partially compensated by self-help squatter buildings mushrooming at various blocks and areas in the city, many of which were then and later designated as urban parks for future land use. A large part of Taipei's population lived in squatter kind of setting in the 1950s, and the third-world experiences were regarded as an integral part of the city's own history and are still acute the moment one enters places like Treasure Hill. Such a phenomenon provides a perceptual framework in fathoming the social meaning of Treasure Hill.

In the late 1940s, Treasure Hill was composed of only six dredger families adapting the military bunkers left over from the colonial time, and the ban for hill-side construction was still effective. The Nationalist government reinforced its military role at the city edge, Treasure Hill was restricted to the use of military units. Yet the guarding soldiers started to build shelters to accommodate their private needs on the steep hill, and the landscape gradually sprawled from temporary structures by the shrine into an organic village of humble, second-hand-material-based, mutually-dependent houses intertwined by labyrinthine alleys and steps.

The city government turned a blind eye to the illegal activities going on under the shield of a military restriction area, yet the indifferent official response to the squatter village in the making summoned more new immigrants to join the self-help, self-built mode of

urban living at the edge. Especially after the 1970s when the military post was finally removed and the Fu-Ho Bridge between the city and the county of Taipei was completed, the Treasure Hill settlement, at an arrow's darting distance from the Bridge and the vigorous Gong-guan living circle, attracted new waves of immigrants from the rural areas of Taiwan to establish their affordable though unsteady standings in the city.

At the peak of its evolution, Treasure-Hill was the second homeland of about 200 families and individuals - many of whom were senile citizens, single veterans, social underclass, students, and South-East Asian immigrants. Under its informal and pre-modern appearance, it reminisces the city's organic past and manifests the tacit understanding of the community's spatial structure. The aesthetic value of its chaotic surface, though debatable, is a clear reflection of the community's daily-life pattern. The residents' ingenious uses of public and semi-public spaces - makeshift arcade, waterfront farmland, terrace gardens, corner-store plaza with movable chairs, outdoor cinema, to name a few - exhibit a collective local wisdom which few conscious designers could ever achieve. This mundane hillside community could have continued to lead an ordinary village life if it was not zoned as an urban park according to the city's renewed urban plan of 1980. In 1993, the official announcement of demolishing the squatter was posted and mailed to all residents. The Treasure Hill story entered a new chapter.

Treasure Hill as a cultural landscape involves discourses on its relationship with the surrounding natural environment, its local history, and community identification. From this stance, conservation of Treasure-Hill has gathered enthusiastic support from intellectuals, NGOs, and local citizens; yet contradicted the rationale of Taipei's modernist planning which prioritizes urban function as a whole over collective memories of the few. Driven by the panic of insecure livelihood, many original residents chose to abandon their houses and left, but those who were not able to or refused to move began to work with volunteer activists to claim their standing in Treasure Hill and to diminish the threat of the "green bulldozer."

After a series of organized protest and intensive study, the city government took a few steps back to survey the feasibility of a plan revision. Soon the planning responsibility for the Treasure Hill Settlement was transferred from the Department of Park and Recreation to the newly established Bureau of Cultural Affairs, the cultural imagination further expanded the polemic of programming a "planned" village out of an "ordinary" settlement by piecemeal evolution.

Though once stigmatized by some urban discourses as the tumor of a pro-growth city, Treasure Hill is also ironically romanticized as a hill-side village which bears the potential of an artistic community. Either viewpoint cannot fairly depict the situation of the settlement today. Even if the progressive thinking of conserving the physical setting and the social fabric of Treasure Hill is encouraging, the destiny of the remaining squatters in around 50 housing units seems ambiguous. After all, the land is public and planned for park use, to legitimize the squatters' residency in the public land requires rezoning and experimental programming in terms of planning regulations.

OURs (the Organization of Urban Re-s, one of the main facilitators of the former conservation movement) is later commissioned by the Bureau of Cultural Affairs to undertake the planning task, and for the time being, the program of 'Treasure Hill Artists (artist-activist) Co-op' intends to propose a co-living commune which will incorporate the original resident units as "welfare homeland – an alternative social housing," a youth hostel (to balance future financial cost), an ecological learning field, and an artists-in-residency program. All the residents of the new village may share facilities such as co-kitchen, co-dining room, bakery, café, collective bookstore, waterfront organic garden and farm, neighborhood self-help center, and various workshops for arts and creative theatres, darkroom, etc. And all the labor put to the care of the community can be transferred as substitute for rent or meals. The restoration is expected to start at the end of 2006, and the original residents will be relocated in an ad-hoc transitional housing project near the settlement or other self-chosen rental units before their return at the completion of the restoration.

2. Artistic experiments at Treasure Hill

The 2003-2004 GAPP (Global Artists Participation Project) witnessed the creative power of art as well as the heightened tension between the community and art. When the highly political and calculated tactics of conservation persuaded the city government to recognize the settlement's artistic potentials for public good and the original squatters as an integral part of the unique and artistic milieu, Treasure Hill was officially perceived as an artists-in-residency setting for struggling poor artists. Yet the residency status of the squatters was far from secure.

It was hardly an easy task to persuade both urban planning committee and historical heritage committee that conservation of this cultural landscape and the community did not diminish the public value of Treasure Hill's existing land use as a public park. To argue the legitimacy of replacing the green park with an artistic village was

controversial, to advocate a social welfare program within the artistic village to preserve the social network of the Treasure Hill settlement was an even more challenging idea. But first of all, Treasure Hill had to be seen and its value appreciated by the general public to precipitate necessary legal procedure of rezoning. One of the tacit missions for the 2003-2004 GAPP, therefore, was to raise Treasure Hill's publicity and public support through arts program. But the medium exposure also caused disturbing consequences in the community's low-key lifestyle. Art was never a familiar term at Treasure Hill before, however, the "artless" community was obliged to participate in art projects or to make contact with arts on their daily routines during the 2003-2004 GAPP to boost the opportunity of being exempt from the green bulldozers of the Park and Recreation Department. Art might be a ticket to permanent residency, practically speaking.

Yet the close encounter with art, for the community participants, did have some unexpected effects – inspired or perturbed, but more than activism's political purposes or an exchange of participation for residency – on their relationship with the city, the community, the environment, and themselves. Even though the overall plan for GAPP attempted to attenuate the impact of high-concept and avant-garde arts on the extant community and to get as much participation from the community as possible, the insistence of maintaining the artists' autonomy did leave indelible traces on the community and the fragile landscape. The crisis of both art and community being institutionalized was impending, and it was only a matter of *how* it would be 'managed' (again, a very problematic term) in the future. Arts program stood out as one of many options.

From rags to tags, from squatter movement to institutionalized artists-in-residency program, will Treasure Hill become an obsolescent urban settlement of organic nature or a progressive urban planning model of creative sustainability? The question lingers on even when the legal procedure of rezoning is almost complete. In the meanwhile, a far more complicated planning for the conservation and restoration of Treasure Hill and its adjacent landscape, thanks to the direct feedback from the GAPP experiment, is trying to lay out a feasible management program for the Treasure Hill Artists Co-op. The planning team realizes better that perhaps, it's not art itself but the intensity of arts implemented within a short span of time that really affects the squatter community, and that evaluation should not be overlooked in the next phase of cultural management.

The Other Home-land theme

Before there was GAPP, the Treasure Hill New Discovery Film Festival programmed in 2002 Taipei International Arts Festival had put Treasure Hill on the city's art map for the

first time. The community was thereafter transformed from the setting for multiple filming locations into the scene for cinema arts happenings. The Treasure Hill Family Cinema Club, informally organized by graduate students at National Taiwan University Graduate Institute of Building and Planning and community members, screens popular and alternative films - from propagandist military films to art-house documentary films - every Wednesday at the re-painted white wall of a defunct building left blank after the large-scale demolition of flood control in 2001. The Club has tacitly become a new community tradition, simply by showing films at regular hours at a ruins-turned-plaza to draw residents out of their living rooms to gather for a weekly event at a new public arena.

The 2003-2004 GAPP further expanded the collaboration experiment between the community and the artists by ushering in artists and activists from all over the world to initiate creative activist programs related to landscape and settlement conservation. The overarching theme was designated “the Other Home-Land” – a dialectic between the social and cultural others and their transitional shelters into the alternative homeland, as well as a reflection of the collective identity of many immigrants in the community from different eras and native lands, - to summon global activists to probe into the historical roots, marginal status, current reality, ecological aspects, and subconscious psyche of Treasure Hill.

The lineup for the 2003 GAPP included: the multiple-dimension landscape art project *Organic Layer Taipei*, the collaborative lomography project *Asia 108 and the Street Gallery of Treasure Hill Flood Images*, the *Ethnography and Chorography Film Festival* at the Treasure Hill outdoor cinema plaza, the 3-week 3-group environmental theatre and workshop series *Happening*, the field experimental actions and international forum of *Ecological Homeland and Micro-climate Architecture*, the subtle *Garden Portraits* project, the international *Creative Sustainability and Self-help Center* participatory workshops and forum, the domestic *Artists-in-Residency Program* and *the Treasure Hill Tea +Photo*, and the paper-pulp based landscape art project *Blue River*.

The interested artists came from Finland, Japan, Germany, Spain, the US, Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, and other regions of Taiwan to participate in the experimental event. Unfortunately due to the constraints of time, budget, resources, and artists’ own schedules, very few of them could stay more than a month to really blend in or establish long-term relationship with the community. Their proposals and actions had to rely on the second-hand descriptions of Treasure Hill and their brief observations and perceptions about the site. However, they all seemed to find inspirations from the uncommon setting and context of Treasure Hill which, unlike a planned artistic village composed only of artists, was blunt,

honest, real, unpretentious, and socially critical. Some of the invited proposals were targeted towards community needs or planning purposes – in another words, their activist goals and expected outcomes were clear at the outset. Some were relatively more ambiguous in setting objectives and open to artistic interpretations. Their scrupulous moves between artistic imaginations and community activism exemplified dynamic and unpredictable processes in exploring the meaning of place identity in the most unlikely place.

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