

HANGZHOU INTERNATIONAL DESIGN WEEK

SOUTHERN SONG IMPERIAL STREET, HANGZHOU, CHINA , 2015

## SPATIAL TRANSLATIONS

A chronicle of the 'Hospital for Broken Things' installation

### Dr Ross McLeod

In 2014 RMIT Interior Design was invited to design an installation around the theme of 'healing' in one of empty traditional shop houses that populate Southern Song Imperial Street in the Nansong district of Hangzhou, China. The invitation was alluring as it called for a design response of careful sensitivity in a situation where both the physical and cultural surroundings would be unfamiliar. The projects promise led to the offering of a 'summer travel studio' to undergraduate Interior Design students. Preferably I wanted six students to accompany me to build the installation. However I was inundated by request by Chinese students who were studying in Australia, who were excited by the prospect of completing a project 'in their home country'.

Initially I knew next to nothing about Hangzhou. From Wikipedia I learnt that Hangzhou is listed as one of the Seven Ancient Capitals of China, the origin of the 'Silk Road' with traces of civilization stretching back 7000 years. It was the city that Marco Polo described in the thirteenth century as being "greater than any in the world".[1] Further research identified that the Nansong district is one of the few traditional areas in China that have been saved from the wrecking ball and bulldozer in the face of the countries recent modernization and growth. (2) The buildings along Southern Song Imperial Street that are now under the protection of the city of Hangzhou include the whitewashed courtyard craftsman's factories of the Qing dynasty that date back hundreds of years, the reconstructed ornate shop-houses of the early twentieth century and the solid concrete and stone edifices that define the state architecture built in the times of the Republic of China.

In 2009, the physical resurrection of the Nansong district was championed by Hangzhou's mayor Cai Qi and was overseen by the Chinese Pritzker prize winning architect Wang Shu. Wang Shu "transformed his task into a collective project by inviting a series of designers to contribute, including Zhang Bin, Qian Qiang, Li Kaisheng, Li Ziangning, Tong Ming and Zhang Lei. Each was allotted a stretch of the road, while Wang Shu supervised their proposals and designed one of the buildings himself, the museum of the Southern Song Dynasty imperial road." [3] Within the streets design the skilful use of rough-hewn natural materials and respect for the beauty and intricacy of the existing traditional architecture has ensured that the area has retained a sense of its original character and charm.

Today the area is a mixture of long-time local inhabitants and the prosperous signs of a youthful 'international' culture. The traditional dwellers still populating the area have resisted the rises in rent and the push for them to vacate the site of their businesses and ancestral homes. Central to this culture is the Hangzhou Hospital of Chinese Medicine and its accompanying museum. Each morning elderly and ailing residents shuffle past the street stalls, cafes and silk stores to take a cup of medicinal tea in the courtyard of the hospital and to wait patiently while their prescribed concoctions of roots and herbs are carefully prepared.

In contrast to these scenes are the first signs of western-style development. Costa Coffee, Häagen-Dazs, the ubiquitous McDonalds and western style youth hostels are mingled with the more long term establishments. Sitting in the Shine café adjacent to the YHA lodgings one evening I witnessed the young Chinese staff projecting a DVD of *Some Like it Hot*[4], one of the videos they told me they use to learn English. However I was not sure how learning the wisecracking 1920's Chicago Gangster quips of Tony Curtis, Jack Lemmon and Marilyn Monroe would serve them in the digitally communicated universe of Baidu, Alibaba, Weibo and WeChat which all young Chinese seem to inhabit.

While commendable architectural gestures have been made to retain the traditional fabric of the built environment along Southern Song Imperial Street, their completion has not guaranteed the future cultural development of the area. The desire by the local government to house local art and design businesses in the beautiful old shop-houses has yet to come to fruition and five years after the renovations many of the buildings at the 'Drum Gate' end of the street are still to be successfully leased. As a response to this situation and as a way of introducing art and design culture to the local population the Zhejiang provincial government has, since 2012, sponsored the running of the Hangzhou International Design Week (IDW).

Curated by *Art to Art* founders Jiang Qiao and Xia Qin (and ably assisted in 2014 by RMIT Interior Design graduate Aimoli Zhang), the mission of IDW is to occupy the remaining empty shops along Southern Song Imperial Street with temporary installations. The concept for the event was to 'make the street a museum' for one week each year. In a flurry of activity that takes place in the weeks leading up to the event the block around Art to Art's offices are transformed into a site for the presentation and discussion of art and design. The design week's activities included the adaptive reimagining and reshaping of fifteen empty buildings by both local and international designers. The 'pavilions' (as they are called) hosted video, animation and sculptural installations; a pop-up design bookstore; retail outlets featuring the work of up and coming Chinese product designers; the *Little Curator* exhibition of art and design work produced by children; the Italian Design duo Mathery studio and their interactive play experience *Pastillo*; and RMIT University Interior Design's *The Hospital for Broken Things*. (5)

In the conception of a project which was located within a site of significant cultural heritage the design team involved in the RMIT installation were asked to carefully consider the issues surrounding cultural and environmental sustainability. (Figure 1) As a response to the theme of 'healing' outlined by the IDW curators, the design and construction of an installation that responded to the physical fabric of the existing buildings and which exhibited works that were produced through the recycling, reuse and reconfiguration of found and broken objects seemed appropriate.

In realising the design, the project team used the concepts of the 'hospital' and the 'patient' as a way of qualifying their ideas. To this end the project attempted to intertwine ideas that were concerned with the realm of medicine with ideas about the nature of the designed object and contemporary lifestyles. Through the adaption and re-use of particular objects and materials the students were asked to comment upon the issues brought about by the nature of modern technology and the consumerism that accompanies it. Within this combination of concepts it was intended that the collective work of the students and the configuration of the installation would offer a reflective experience for the visitor, a moment to consider the nature of the world and question their role in taking care of it.

## **METAPHORICAL OBJECTS**

The design of the installation and the sculptural objects on display within it were developed through two intensive design and construction workshops. The first workshop held in Melbourne produced the majority of the objects that were displayed in the exhibition. Over a two week period the students were encouraged to gradually develop an appreciation of the metaphorical dimensions that lie within objects and materials. Initially they were asked to scour Melbourne to source discarded everyday objects which they would use as raw material for the design and construction of a series of sculptural works. As an introduction to this exercise the students were asked to research aspects of twentieth century sculpture, particularly Duchamp's ready-mades and the industrial assemblages of David Smith, Anthony Caro and Australian sculptor Robert Klippell.

In undertaking the design process the students were asked to defer coming up with a concept for what they were making and rather adopt an approach to design in which they would think 'through' the objects and materials in front of them. In this way the students immersed themselves in the processes and techniques available in the workshop environment and discovered that through these acts that they could imbue meaning and intent into built works. Ultimately the physical, structural and metaphorical aspects of a piece were synthesised simultaneously within the act of making.

In coming to terms with this approach to the creative act we referenced Richard Serra's famous *Verb List*. As Samantha Friedman (6) points out, these lists were a creative strategy in which the artist dealt with the nature of process and were used as a way of applying various activities to unspecified materials. As we were attempting to draw medical analogies with the nature of the physical world we compared Serra's list with a list of the prefixes and suffixes that make up the description of surgical procedures (7) and sought to adopt quasi-surgical procedures to the transformation of the broken objects in the workshop. (Figure 2)

These conceptual foundations to the project led to a study of the developments of science in relation to the body and the issues being raised by genetics, artificial intelligence and the 'post-human' condition in the age of advanced communication and biological manipulation. The work of the celebrated RMIT Interior Design alumna Lucy McCrae (8) and her work as a 'body architect' was referenced as a way of adapting everyday items to make commentary on the evolution of the body's relationship with technology.

To both further complicate and qualify the students evolving approach to the assemblage of their objects they were asked to consider the environmental implications of China's (and the rest of the world's) rapid industrial development and the enthusiastic global adoption of Western brand-name consumerism. Levelling a critique of this contemporary 'Cultural Revolution' to an audience (and political administrators) in China was considered to be a fine line to tread and so the issues the students were addressing and their form of expression had to be carefully tempered and suitably communicated. As I pointed out to the students, they did not have to be Ai Wei Wei.

Ultimately the students developed a complex and multi-dimensional approach to the analysis of found and broken objects and their reconfiguration into expressions and commentaries on the relationship between the body, technology, the environment and culture.

Examples of the finished sculptural works included Rebecca Sherlock's *Genus*, which made correlations between various families of body parts and a corresponding collection of everyday objects (Figure 3) and Lauri Uldrikis's *Scar* necklace which offered a gentle memory of the nature of pain and healing. In his *DNA* piece, Tao Gu used an assemblage of coloured pencils to reproduce the spiral form of the DNA sequence that informs the genetic structure of all life while Tiange Wang's

*Optics* reconstructed the ubiquitous modem router to expose the technology of light that informs the revolution in communication devices that are transforming our lives. (Figure 4)

In Xuefei Li's *Prosthetic* the mechanical arms of an umbrella were adapted into an attachment for the human hand. When worn the movement of the wearers fingers extended the levered arms of the mechanism. Attached to each finger of the structure was a surgical tool. (Figure 5) Jianyu Chen *Forceps* employed the elements of an aluminium ice tray to create facsimiles of vices and clamps used by doctors in heart surgery and Xin Meng's *Face* reassembled the inner workings of an old-fashioned alarm clock to construct a model of the face of an automaton. (Figure 6) Ranqi Liu's *Transplant* used a book on scalp surgery as the raw material. On one page of the open book is a map of the plug marks used in the hair restoration process while on the other the pages of the book have been cut into strands and shaped into flowing curling locks of paper hair. (Figure 7)

Jin Song's *Bionic* took the components of a broken Apple iPhone and re-imagined them as technologies that are integrated directly into the human body. A vision of a near future in which the distinction between the artificial and the natural is blurred and the idea of the cybernetic organism becomes commonplace. (Figure 8) Cong Zhu's *Bypass* was constructed from the remains of broken desk lamp. The steel tube neck of the light stand, power cord and switch were looped back into each other to create a 'useless object'. The piece acted as a symbol of the endless cycle of the consumption of energy that drives our contemporary desires.

Junli Zhang's *Infection* piece communicated the issues of the pollution occurring in China's rivers by expressing the chemical composition and resulting colour of the contaminated waterways through a series of glass laboratory measuring containers. Yuying Li's *Biopsy* piece took a similar approach by addressing the nature of soil-degradation and its effect on the growth of plant life. Chuyao Zhou's *Respiration* adapted a dust mask to make comments on the nature of the air pollution that occurs as a result of rapid modernisation and the development of megacities. On one side of the mask a bamboo birdcage represented the purity of ancient times. On the other side, a 3D printed model of Shanghai's Oriental Pearl Tower sat at the centre of a swirling dust storm generated by a fan fitted in the dust mask's base. (Figure 9)

In Irvan Shayne Ward's *Bloodline* a loop of silicon tube continuously pumped red bloodlike fluid around in a knotted journey. The title of the work related to both the cardio-vascular system that maintains our life energies and the ongoing heritage of our families, race and species that extends back through history. (Figure 10) In Ting Jiang's *Heart*, the bamboo strips of a traditional steamer were intertwined to make a bamboo heart. The piece was seen to act as a tribute to the essence of Chinese culture that endures through the pace of technological change. (Figure 11)

## **ALLEGORICAL SPACE**

The second workshop in Hangzhou involved the students responding to the physical fabric of the shop-house site. This called for a subtle integration of the display of the abstract sculptural objects made in Melbourne with the white washed plaster walls, dark exposed timber beams and ornate screens and windows that defined the traditional Chinese building. While we had been sent photos of the site and had loosely planned a design strategy around these images, when we

arrived we realised that the actual building was twice as large as had been documented. (Figure 12) This involved a rethink of the approach to the display of the work and meant that the pieces within the exhibition had the opportunity to be much more inherently integrated to their surroundings.

Constructing such an adaptive intervention in an unfamiliar site in China posed major challenges. As we were far away from the comfortable familiarity of the RMIT Architecture and Design workshop and our known network of material and hardware suppliers, our first duties were to find out how to source the materials and tools we needed to enact the project. The first few days of the Hangzhou phase of the project involved a maddening quest for the appropriate materials we needed to complete the installation. Many requests were 'lost in translation' and we found that the best communication technique was drawing. So we drew everything from plans and perspectives to images of the tools we needed.

Interestingly the clearest communication I had was with our Chinese electrician, who did not speak a word of English and didn't care much for plans. However I found I could walk around the site with him pointing at the desired location of light fixtures and by gesturing with my hands describe the type of light and beam angle needed in each space and he understood implicitly. It seems a good contractor is a good contractor no matter the language barriers. The Chinese students on the team also displayed their uncanny ability to source and buy items online. During the next week there was a steady stream of motorcycle couriers arriving at our door at all hours with all manner of hardware and materials.

After a few days we had developed an efficient working model and the group of students had been broken up into three teams to address different aspects and zones of the installation. As we were designing a 'hospital' and adopting the iconography of the 'clinic' in the imagining of the space we divided the project into three distinct departments. On the ground floor as you entered the building was the *Waiting Room*. Situated in different rooms throughout the building were *The Wards* and the centrepiece of the exhibition on the first floor was the *Operating Theatre*.

The ground floor *Waiting Room* was seen as the most prominent public space of the show and served as an introduction of the subject matter and typology of work that the visitor would encounter in the exhibition. On the street façade of the shop a large hospital cross was defined on the front window, so that passers-by could view through the cruciform shape and view the works on display. (Figure 13)

In this space the form of the chair was used to express the physical and psychological conditions of patients waiting to be seen by a doctor. The chairs were realised within a short period of time in Hangzhou, with discarded furniture found within the city. The works were produced collaboratively and the character of each 'patient' evolved in response to both the materials at hand and the 'personality' of each chair in relationship to each other. (Figure 14, 15)

The six 'patients' in the *Waiting Room* included: *Wheelchair*, which was constructed from a pair of crutches that were woven to the steel frame of an overturned reception chair (Figure 16); *Grandfather* which involved the subtle merging of a simple worn timber bench with a cane walking stick (Figure 17); *Hearing Aid* which was made from a traditional bamboo children's chair that was wrapped in bandages onto which a number of resin-cast ears were attached to create a surreal affect (Figure 18); *Collision* which reconstructed the fragmented remains of a laminated bamboo rocking chair to create a calligraphic-like piece of modern sculpture (Figure 19); *Split Personality* which joined two almost identical office chairs into the opposite black and white halves of a whole (Figure 20); and *Mother and Child* which intersected a child's chair with an adult's chair to create an overall form that suggests that it is a pregnant woman or (as a tribute to the Australian origins of the exhibition) a kangaroo with a joey in its pouch. (Figure 21)

In *The Wards*, the works that were created in Melbourne were arranged into different departments of the hospital. The spaces include the *Research Laboratories, Blood Bank, Surgical Ward, Post-Op, Intensive Care and the Cardiac and Plastic*

*Surgery Units.* Within these spaces a system was employed that suspended a sandwich construction of laser etched acrylic and black MDF panels. On each laser cut panel were the names of the piece in both English and Mandarin, this was accompanied by a graphic image that related to the object on display and its' intended meaning.

The panels were attached to a system of tensioned string elements that were reminiscent of orthopaedic traction devices or the threaded lines of a surgeon's suture. Each suspension network of each display was tailored to act both structurally and expressively within the individual spaces of the building. Surrounding the wired floating plinths were multiple layers of translucent tulle that followed the architectural lines of the ceiling alcoves. These veils of fabric created an ethereal separation between the exhibited pieces and the physicality of the building. The pinpoint lighting of the objects within the darkened inner spaces heightened the clarity of detail of each piece and added a dramatic and mysterious effect to the exhibition. The atmospheric quality of these spaces and the collection of objects that used analogies of the inner workings of the human body to communicate its sustainable agenda resulted in the exhibition acquiring a reputation as being ghostly and unsettling among the staff of the IDW. (Figures 22, 23, 24, 25, 26)

The disquieting nature of the exhibition was amplified further in the final space of the show, the *Operating Theatre*, which used the imagery of a patient on the operating table as its centrepiece. In the centre of the curtained space an effigy of a human body lay, as if recovering after an operation. The body was clad in rubber gloves, reaching, aiding and supporting the patient. At its heart was the video image of a human eye (Figure 27, 28).

The initial arrangement of this space was in fact too disturbing for the official party of Zhejiang Province Ministry of Culture who visited the exhibition before its opening. They felt that the space felt like a mortuary and requested that the final installation be reconfigured so as to not directly look as though it housed a human body. The students who had designed the space were understandably disappointed, however, in a way I agreed with the ministers, and felt that the students had got too caught up with the affective qualities of the installation and forgotten the actual intention of the space.

The space was intended to be an interactive memorial within the exhibition. The inner curtains that enclosed the 'patient' were surrounded by another layer of curtain which created a one metre wide walking space around the bed. On the outer curtains were suspended 4000 traditional Chinese coins. Across from the *Operating Theatre* was a desk where students were stationed. As the visitors came into this space the students asked them to respond to the themes of the exhibition. On pre-prepared pieces of paper the visitors were asked to make a wish for the future of the world and to tie it on to one of the coins. During the course of the exhibition the walls surrounding the 'patient' became filled with personal thoughts, hopes, dreams and visions (Figures 29, 30). In this way the final piece in the exhibition was a constructed moment of participatory design which the audience were invited to complete.

## **DIDACTIC INTERPRETATIONS**

Over the four weeks of the workshop the design team had worked long hours and in the final set-up of the exhibition had stayed until past midnight on many occasions to ensure the work was done. However nothing prepared us for sustained intensity of the exhibition in which more than 10,000 people walked through the doors over seven days. The tidal wave of visitors attending on the first day and the potential destruction of the exhibition due to the crowd within the space, led us to posting a security guard on the front door for the rest of the week. For the remaining duration of the show the guard

would admit twenty five people every ten minutes for ten hours each day. The numbers never flagged and the line would often extend one hundred metres up the road. The Mandarin speaking RMIT Interior Design students who had donated their time to man the show found themselves in an endless cycle of explanation of the works to an inquisitive Chinese public. (Figure 31)

Throughout the design process, the curators had constantly asked us what the exhibition was about. When I would answer that “I could tell them what we did but was unsure if I could tell them what it was about” they were not satisfied. When I countered that “the meaning of the installation would be different for each person attending the show, depending on their life experience” they seemed even less impressed. They needed a clear cut defined message that they could communicate to the media and the public attending the show. They wanted written descriptions of every piece posted in English and Mandarin next to each work so as to make clear to the visitor exactly how to understand the exhibition and its content. This desire for a singularly promoted message behind a work of art was in stark contrast to the gallery environments we were used to in Melbourne, where such didactic explanations of work exhibited are regularly scorned by contemporary curators.

The difficulty that I had with giving a pat explanation of the installation was that the project had been undertaken as an accretion of ideas in which sixteen people were actively involved. In this process the exploration of issues of environmental and cultural sustainability had been channelled through the metaphor of the hospital and enacted through a direct physical engagement with found objects and materials at hand. This complexity of the brief was further compounded due to the physical and cultural distance between where the ideas were first formulated (in Australia), and the realities of site and context that we discovered in China. The structuring of these issues with both pedagogical and research outcomes in mind, (as are the demands of contemporary academia) brought distinctly different layers of reflection and analysis to the work.

As a designer, artist and teacher at some point you have to let the works (and students) go. You must allow them to find their own identity within the context of culture. You must let the rest of the world tell you what you have done. Toward the end of the exhaustive week of the exhibition, in which we were endlessly asked to give a definitive rendering of the meaning of the show, an earnest young Chinese man who could speak some English asked me to tell him “what it was about”. To counter the question, which I had heard repeatedly before, I asked him “what he felt it was about”. After standing in silence for some considerable time, he said “I can see that in the reassembly of everyday objects into the insides of the human body and in the descriptions of the issues that accompany the work; the exhibition is suggesting that the thing which is broken is inside of us, it is within our own thinking toward the world”. I could not have put it better myself. Finally I had met someone who had brought ‘himself’ to the exhibition and had given back to me, something more than I had offered.

## **PROJECT TEAM**

Leader: Dr Ross McLeod

Tutor and Translator: Amy Ping Yan

Student Designers: Jianyu Chen, Jin Song, Xin Meng, Cong Zhu, Xuefei Li, Tiange Wang, Ting Jiang, Irvan Shayne Ward, Tao Gu, Ranqi Liu, Yuying Li, Chuyao Zhou, Junli Zhang, Rebecca Sherlock, Lauri Uldrikis

## End Notes

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## Figures

Figure 01 -RMIT interior design students

Figure 02 - Melbourne Workshop

Figure 03 - Rebecca Sherlock – Genus

Figure 04 - Tiange Wang – Optics

Figure 05 - Xuefei Li – Prosthetic

Figure 06 - Xin Meng – Face

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Figure 11 - Ting Jiang – Heart

Figure 12 - Existing Conditions



Figure 13 - Street Façade

Figure 14 - Waiting Room

Figure 15 - Waiting Room

Figure 16 – Wheelchair

Figure 17 – Grandfather

Figure 18 - Hearing Aid

Figure 19 – Collision

Figure 20 - Split Personality

Figure 21 - Mother and Child

Figure 22 – Wards

Figure 23 – Wards

Figure 24 – Wards

Figure 25 – Wards

Figure 26 – Wards

Figure 27 - Operating Theatre

Figure 28 - Operating Theatre

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Figure 30 - Interactive Memorial

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