

IIAS Reports



2016 IIAS-CSEAS Winter School – Mapping the aesthetics of urban life in Asia: a dialogue with the arts

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THE SIX-DAY WINTER SCHOOL organized by the *International Institute of Asian Studies* in Leiden (IIAS), in collaboration with the *Centre for Southeast Asian Studies in Kyoto* (CSEAS), successfully lived up to its interdisciplinary aims of bringing together artists, researchers and practitioners to work towards developing models of intervention in urban spaces. Hosted by CSEAS, this workshop enabled participants to navigate Kyoto, and brought them closer to their own urban realities. Doctoral candidates, from disciplines as varied as Literature, Musicology, Archaeology, Anthropology, Cultural Studies, Media Studies, Design and Civil Engineering and Environmental Studies, participated in lectures and fieldwork, gathering a host of perspectives on Kyoto, a city that is a repository of tradition and modernity, to think about aesthetics in urban Asia. They spent many hours working on creative collaborative projects, with the aim to broaden the space of intervention in order to stimulate public engagement with the city.

Lectures

The first day began early at the Inamori Foundation Building, Kyoto University with a welcoming lecture by Dr Mario López (Associate Professor, CSEAS), Dr Nathan Badenoch (Associate Professor, CSEAS) and Prof. Kono Yasuyuki (Director of CSEAS) who introduced the themes, upcoming schedule of the conference and acquainted the participants with the geocultural reality of Kyoto. This initial session was followed by the introduction of participants, who had arrived from places spanning Indonesia, the Netherlands, Nepal, India, USA, China, Singapore, Pakistan and Malaysia. Scholars from the Graduate School of Asian and African Studies (Zenta Nishio and Kim Yujin) and the University of New South Wales Australia (Amanda Lim) volunteered to help, and brought in their own reserves of knowledge and experience to the program. Ms. Martina Van den Haak (International Institute for Asian Studies) worked meticulously towards the coordination and the coherence of the entire effort. The three convenors of the workshop, Susie Ibarra, Kenta Kishi and Jeroen de Kloet, introduced their respective approaches and plans for the workshops and fieldwork.

Participant introductions were followed by two extremely informative lectures by Dr Andrea Flores Urushima and Yoko Inoue. Dr Urushima, a researcher at the Centre for Integrated Studies (CIAS) at Kyoto University, is currently studying the urban reconstruction of post-war Japan. Her lecture entitled “Everyday and Innovation in the making of Kyoto a Cultural Heritage City” drew the attention of participants towards urban development policies in Japan and how they sought to integrate tradition and modernity, in reinventing Kyoto. Structures like the Kyoto Tower and the International Conference Centre, famed for the Kyoto Protocol conference in 1966, were efforts at modernization and were placed simultaneously with regulations of traditional structures like

the beautiful but fire prone *Kyo-machiyas* (traditional, wooden townhouses of Kyoto) on the streets of Kyoto. In a conference that sought to investigate the space for social dialogue in modern Asian cities, Dr Urushima’s lecture highlighting the co-existence of official master projects and narratives with independent proposition from citizens, contributing towards urban planning in Kyoto, opened up new avenues of thinking and understanding, what she called the ‘mental structure of the city’.

Dr Urushima’s talk was followed by a lecture by Yoko Inoue, a multi-disciplinary artist who has worked extensively on sculptures, installations and public performance art. Yoko’s work explores the intersection of the sacred and profane in the context of art in this age of globalization. Her lecture sought to engage the participant’s attention in the social life of things, by identifying the cultural traits of specific objects and how they become part of the public imagination. Citing art as a collaborative enterprise, Yoko talked at length about the concepts of barter and exchange and how sacred objects are placed and circulated within capitalism. Participants collaboratively thought of ways in which interventions can be made in the consumerist space of the market. The three convenors then continued to introduce their subjects to the participants as a preliminary exercise to the next day’s workshops.

Workshops

The workshop lectures were also held at the Inamori Foundation Building located on the bank of the Kamogawa River. The main workshop was divided into three participatory seminars and lectures by the three convenors.

The first workshop, conducted by Susie Ibarra (Composer, Percussionist, Faculty member in Music and the Center for Advancement in Public Action, Bennington College, USA), was entitled “The City as an Orchestra: Remapping Cities through Sound”. The participants were guided through intense listening exercises with sample sound excerpts. The aim was to create awareness of sonic textures through ambient listening. A discussion followed on the orchestral principle that can be observed in the soundscapes of the city. Introduction, theme, variation, repetition and recapitulation are the aspects of that principle, through which the listening practice can be executed in the compositional paradigm. A defining question that emerged out of the discussion was: “Who/what is the conductor function in the urban soundscape, considering that orchestral principle can be extrapolated to the understanding of urban landscape?” Equipped with queries, questions and recording equipment, the participants were guided into a sound walk through the central segments of downtown Kyoto; Oike Street, Sanjo Street, Teramachi and Kawaramachi Streets, sampling and mapping sounds of the streets, water channels, stores, floors, classrooms, shops, traffic signals, the river flow and people. Creating a harmonious arrangement and imagining an essay of sonic aesthetics was the aim of the project.

The second workshop, “Urban Mapping and the Exploration/Cultivation of Empty Space”, was conducted by

the renowned architect, practitioner, teacher and theorist Kenta Kishi (Orange House Studio). Kishi has ongoing projects in Surabaya (Indonesia), and he drew on these experiences in Southeast Asia to help highlight similarities and differences between the two cities. The workshop and following group work focused on the transformation of ‘empty’ spaces into ‘spaces of absence’. These are the urban spaces that exhibit ‘lack of cultivation’. They subtly embody a multiplicity of functions: dynamic, spontaneous relationships between elements that define the work of architecture and its relationship with its surrounding space. The product of this interaction can be a ‘quasi-public space’, ‘formal public space’ and/or ‘problematic invisible adjunct spaces’ like space between different types of ownerships. The workshop also highlighted the problems of dead/dormant space by exemplifying the alarming 15% empty/abandoned houses in Japan. The proposition to address the problem came in the form of ‘updating’ the found absent spaces through careful customisation and occupancy thereby maximising their potential. This can be facilitated through locating micro-emergencies that act as the trigger for update thereby possibly transforming the spaces of absence into alternative spaces. This theory was put into praxis as part of the workshop, by asking the participants who were divided into small groups, to locate and propose transformations of spaces of absence within the Inamori Foundation Building. Participants went around the building in groups and came up with proposals aimed towards transforming the absent spaces into productive ones - library lounges, bookshelves and smoking rooms. They presented their findings and the credibility of the exercise was established.

The third workshop conducted by Dr Jeroen de Kloet (Professor of Globalisation Studies and Director of the Amsterdam Centre for Globalisation Studies (ACGS) at the University of Amsterdam), was titled “Urban Precarity, Revitalization and Occularcentrism”. The workshop focused on the sensory experience of Asian cities that prioritise sight, and are therefore visual spectacles in themselves. The ocularcentrism of the city makes imperative the need to record, to film. Participants were introduced to the idea of precarity in urban spaces that are constantly in the process of decay and regeneration. “What does it mean for a city where everything has to be destroyed or kept?” was a question that the participants grappled with while they engaged in discussions about the possibility of a ‘creative city’, where urban precarity brought about through commerce and expansion would be inextricable from processes of revitalization. Participants engaged with sites that may have been subjected to this process of gentrification. Various schools that were explored included the former Rissei Elementary School Building, the 1928 Creative Building, and the Kyoto Manga Museum. The method was deeply rooted in the global motivation towards creative understanding. Therefore, photography, soundscaping, artistic intervention, participatory and comparative methods of aesthetic theorisation of urban spaces were employed.

The day ended with instructions for fieldwork, plans for excursion and the division of the groups into specific sub topics of interest under the respective convenors. The venue of the school was shifted the next day to the former Rissei Elementary School, which has been revitalised into a community and art centre. The objective was to understand the city and undertake fieldwork. The art centre worked as the rendezvous point, the workshop, the café, the space for rehearsal, and the space for presentation for the remaining days of the workshop. In fact it became the very embodiment of the revitalization process.

Fieldwork

The fieldwork entailed two days of lectures and visits to the sites. The first day began with two lectures by Akira Kanbe (Head of the Rissei Elementary School City Planning Committee and member of the Kyoto Poncho City Planning Conference) and Ikuko Naito (Head of the Kyoto Keikan Forum (NPO)). The lectures were delivered in Japanese and were translated in English by Yoshida Chiharu. Both speakers focused on the changes and transitions in the urban area of Kyoto with special reference to the development of the new town around the Kamogawa River. They highlighted the current policies of town planning and maintenance of the old townscape of Kyoto. These lectures, while aiming to familiarize participants with the intricacies of the city in order to equip them for subsequent fieldwork, also introduced them to specificities of Japanese Culture. Akira Kanbe elaborated on how in Japan, art is not an individual activity, but a collaborative one. This is reflected in the Japanese city too, which can be read as an accumulation of cultures and artefacts from around the world. It is perhaps for this reason that tradition and modernity coexist in the city so effortlessly. The fieldwork was an attempt to trace this co-existence on the streets of Kyoto. The participants began by visiting the Zuisenji Temple where the priest delivered a lecture on the ancestors of the temple and its history. This was followed by a walk around the Pontocho area. The Pontocho street runs parallel to the West Banks of the Kamogawa River and is the site of traditional shops and restaurants of Kyoto.

Above:
Winter School
2016 Participants.
Photo courtesy
of Amanda Lim.

During the afternoon, the participants visited the Kyoto City Hall for a lecture on the Kyoto City Landscape Policy, delivered by Kadogawa Shinichiro (Kyoto City Hall, Landscape Department, Landscape Policy Planning Division). The participants were introduced to the official measures taken to ensure Kyoto's beautification. These included the processes of preservation, revitalization and creation in the basic concept of landscaping and city making. The attempt was to understand how natural beauty, cultural heritage and modern processes of beautification were harmonised through the landscaping policies of the city. The day ended with a visit to Sanjo Street, one of the liveliest shopping streets in Kyoto, and the Nishiki market, famed for its shops offering traditional Kyoto cuisine. While strolling along these streets, participants also made short visits to the nearby Mataba Shrine and the Nishiki Tenmangu Shrine. This manner of perambulating through the city offered the participants insights into the mutual co-existence of shrines, shopping malls and traditional markets in Kyoto city.

The next day the participants were divided into two teams. The first one led by Mario López visited the Fushimi-Inari Temple, named after Inari, the Shinto God of Rice. The temple is famously known for its ten thousand Torii gates that lead up to the shrine and that were donated by different companies as a token of gratitude for their prosperity. The highlight of this fieldwork, however, was the visit to Kohso Oiwa, a Buddhist Woodcarver who works to keep the ancient art of woodcarving alive in the area. The second group led by Nathan Badenoch went up to Mount Hieizan, located in Kyoto's eastern Mountain ranges and the site of the Eryakunji Temple, one of the most important monasteries in Japanese history and the headquarters of Japanese Buddhism. These visits, when coupled with the lectures arranged during the fieldwork, allowed the participants to reflect on the process of restoration, preservation and revitalization of cultural heritage central to their understanding of the city of Kyoto.

Presentations

After two days of collecting data and samples from the city and many hours of planning and working together over endless cups of coffee, the last day of the Winter School was to be the day of presentations. The presentations were attended by quite a few people from the city and members of the Japan Foundation, represented by Kei Kojima, Ai Kawamura and Chiharu Yoshida were also on hand to assist with interpretation. The group presentations began with Susie Ibarra's group, followed by Dr Kishi's group, and were concluded by the group headed by Dr de Kloet.

City Orchestra

After initial meditations and listening exercises, there were numerous categories of sounds that were to be recorded, isolated, arranged and finally composed. There was a need

for a foundation track that established the theme on which different characters and elements must introduce, repeat, vary and recapitulate. The sounds must be representative. Silence is of paramount importance for a city like Kyoto. It must not be overpowered, yet be punctuated by the various sonic elements that create the orchestral texture that can represent the city, her life, and her people. With a compositional thread, equipped with recorders, the participants went scouring the city for the necessary representative sounds. After collecting them, they sorted them for quality, clarity and relevance. Then the composition began which carefully created layers, textures and plots, with space reserved for live elements. Overnight, Susie's team worked on the composition and arrangement, bringing all the individual elements together, woven into an organic whole. With the help of a sound editing suite and four people live-mixing the track over an 8.1 transmission system, the essay was presented in the auditorium of the former Rissei Elementary School. But before the sonic essay, the presentation began with Dayang Yraola introducing a slideshow of visuals of Kyoto collected over the span of the week, followed by a live performance by an ensemble led by Susie Ibarra on Kulintang, Andrea Giolai on flute, Mohamed Shahril Salleh on piano and Soaham Mandal on improvised percussions. It was accompanied by a dance presentation by Widya Suryadini. Following this, Maria Adriani presented a short note of summary of the entire process, Rafique Wassan narrated a travelogue and the presentation was concluded with a poem written and read out by Widya Suryadini.

Peeled Onions

Dr de Kloet's team concerned itself with attempting to deconstruct and present before an audience the uniqueness of Kyoto's beauty. Many of the lectures that the participants attended had tried to define the uniqueness of Kyoto's beauty, ranging from official measures of beautification to its cultural heritage. This team talked to the residents of Kyoto on the streets and in museums to discover what made Kyoto beautiful. The participants conducted interviews and recordings in the Art Museum of Kyoto, The City Hall and on the Sanjo and Poncho streets. Participants Anissa, Rahadiningtyas, Elizabeth Wijaya, Markus Wernli and Kim Dinh Bui embarked on a unique project. Accompanied by Shinya Akutagawa, they went around Kyoto city with a tray and a few onions, asking willing participants to peel the onions layer for layer, and while doing so, talk about what makes Kyoto beautiful through the metaphor of the onion. They arrived at some interesting insights and developed a film based on their research which they presented on the final day. Preeti Singh and Khushboo Bharti visited the Kyoto Manga Museum at the Kyoto Seika University and the Kyoto City Street Museum respectively. Their presentations attempted to highlight how popular culture like Manga and heritage traditions sit neatly alongside each other in Kyoto city.

They compared their insights from the museum with the ethos of the streets in Kyoto through photographs, maps, postcards and other street items, where video games and manga stores are found alongside temples and shrines. Mengfei Pan's google street map took the viewer on a journey through these streets by bringing them alive on the screen. Elly Kent put up a short film, along with an installation with a pylon, aimed at highlighting the official measures for the beautification of Kyoto and the processes of control and surveillance that they entailed.

Introducing Presence in Absent Spaces

Dr Kishi's team worked around Sanjo Street, the Art Centre and the Art Museum. Their attempt was to find empty spaces in the city, those that could be recreated as productive and participatory spaces. The presentations and performances by the team members attempted to evoke this very spirit of participation and engagement of the audience by inviting them to take part in their installations/spaces. Catherine Bender put up a collection of postcards and pamphlets from the shops and lanes of Kyoto. Her attempt was to highlight the spaces and possibilities of individual and collective protest in the city. Arjen Nauta, through his simple but clever installation, flirted with the idea of private space; Dinesh Kafle invited the audience to take part in his project that brought up questions of home and belonging; Jennifer looked at urban nostalgia; Sharenee Paramasivam's project explored the transnational presence as absent space; and Liwen Deng, through her installation, invited the participants to take part in the recreation of unused spaces in the Art Centre.

The discussions from the Art Centre continued late into the evening on the last day. The farewell dinner at Ryoma Sanjo witnessed many references to 'absent spaces', 'oculocentrism' and 'sonic energy'. The 2016 IAS-CSEAS Winter School was not only a great learning experience for its participants, but it also culminated in some wonderful friendships and professional associations.

The 2017 IAS-SSRC Winter School (January 2017), "Media Activism and Postcolonial Futures", will be co-organised by IAS and the Social Science Research Council (New York), and hosted by the C-Centre (Centre for Chinese Media and Comparative Communication Research) at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (www.ias.asia/winterschool2017).

Report prepared by Winter School participants Preeti Singh and Soaham Mandal (both of Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi).

Below: Participants presenting their work. Photo courtesy of Amanda Lim.

References

- 1 For the programme and full list of participants, please visit www.ias.asia/winterschool2016

