

Curating the Ancient City of Suzhou

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Lumens Festival archive #36
Suzhou, China
Lumens Festival Project Archive
Photo: Shane Hulbert

Lumens Festival: Curating the ancient city originated from a research visit to the Shanghai and Suzhou region in China, 2009, with researchers Geoff Hogg and Clare Leporati. The initial trip was to begin our research into creating the Meridians Intercultural Framework and Network in the region. This involved expanding art in public space networks and exploring potential research opportunities. Prior to this trip, we were fortunate to make a connection with the Suzhou Art, Design and Technology Institute and as a result began a dialogue to develop a collaborative visual arts project to be undertaken in the city of Suzhou.

During this time, I was undertaking PhD research investigating the city as a curated space. This research focused on understanding how the curation of the visual arts in public space operates in urban centres in relation to their cultural and social contexts. The Suzhou context was an opportunity to put into practice some of the theoretical research I was exploring. As artistic practices are influenced by personal experiences, curatorial practices can also be influenced by these circumstances; and this chapter explores the personal influences on the development of the curatorial framework and practices in this project. It takes into consideration the urban site and contemporary practices in the curating of art in public space.

Personal influences in curatorial practices

From a personal perspective, identifying as an Australian born Chinese artist, curator and researcher, I have long been fascinated with exploring the complicated and layered space between Australia, as my home, and my Chinese cultural heritage. Developing this research project gave me an opportunity to engage with a Chinese urban space and to continue my interests in the connections between Australia and China. These personal connections have

been prevalent in my family for over four generations, beginning with my great-grandfather's arrival as a laborer and market gardener at the beginning of the twentieth century, when he first migrated to the town of Cobar, located in central New South Wales, really in the middle of nowhere. My Chinese-Australian explorations have been expressed through various forms, principally through the development of artwork and the curation of contemporary art exhibitions engaging both cultures.

Lumens was an opportunity to rethink the Australian-Chinese connections from a research perspective by investigating specific urban spaces of individual cities as curatable spaces for artistic expression. The project was directly influenced by my PhD research, *The City as a Curated Space* (Wong, 2012), which researched urban spaces as a distributed model of exhibition practice, an alternative and yet parallel model to the traditional museological model of exhibition.

Considering the site of Suzhou, China

In Suzhou, I was immediately struck by the unique heritage of the city's built environment, which still contains characteristics of the traditional Chinese style city development. It is an urban centre laced with lime-washed dwellings sitting alongside an ancient network of canals and stone bridges that are over 2,500 years old. These urban structures were used once as the main transport channels for the silk industry, which originated in the region.¹ They remain as a legacy of the prosperity of this historical period of the city. The network of ancient canals that continue to run throughout the centre of Suzhou is in stark contrast to the contemporary megacities² of Shanghai and Beijing, and sits as a point of difference despite Suzhou being a newly urbanising Chinese city.

Suzhou, as a mid-sized city with a population of over six million (Suzhou Government, 2013) is also experiencing an urban transformation, with the addition of new urban infrastructure to support the population in context of the ancient city structure. In relation to the massive physical transformations of global cities, academic and editor of *Other Cities, Other Worlds* (2008) Andreas Huyssen captures these renewed global urban conditions, which are impacting on the accelerated growth of Chinese cities in the twenty-first century:

Most cities of the world have undergone major transformations in recent decades. Processes of urbanization have greatly accelerated across the world, and cities have grown closer to each other economically and culturally. Transnational corporations, with their effects on local and global economies, have created new networks of cities, and the spread of the global and regional cultural industries, heritage foundations, mass tourism, labor migrations, academic exchanges, and cultural spectacles such as biennales, sports events and blockbuster museum shows have made “other cities” part of the way we live and perceive the world together (Huysen, 2008, p. 1).

These urban conditions pose the question of the role of the cultural industries and heritage foundations in processes of urban renewal in the global age. In researching the context of the *Lumens* project, there was an opportunity to investigate how contemporary visual art practitioners are able to activate and bring renewed meaning to such heritage sites. The special heritage character of Suzhou now sits among a city that continues to expand and modernize alongside other Chinese cities. The works of many of the Suzhou-based artists in the *Lumens* project are concerned with the issue of urban expansion. The unique architecture and aesthetics of the city inspired questions about the role heritage plays in the built environment of radically modernising Chinese cities. These questions also prompted consideration of how contemporary art practices could work in relation to such unique sites.

Influences from research on the curated city

My research into the city as a curated space envisioned urban spaces as a distributed model of exhibition practice, alternative yet parallel to the traditional museological model of exhibition practices. In delving deeper into the proposition that there are various models of curated cities, I was able to identify several forms of urban curation influencing the conceptual development of the *Lumens* exhibition.

Even within Australia urban curation practices vary from region to region, city to city. Through case studies in my research, various models were in evidence. The two major studies of central Melbourne and central Sydney revealed practices

specific to each city due to a number of factors including the nature of the built environment, the local and artistic community, and the economy.

The Melbourne case study revealed a genealogy of activities that were more artist-activated, temporary-based and participatory in nature. This model also encouraged individual artists to create artworks in urban space with support from the local government authority and the general community. These initiatives were made possible by programs that invited artists to propose concepts for self-selected sites and for younger artists to be mentored by more experienced artists who have worked previously in public spaces.

My research into central Sydney indicated that patterns of art in public space have been orientated more towards a 'deadline urbanism' approach (Dean, 2005), where publicly accessible art is stimulated by the deadline of major international events (in Sydney's case the hosting of the Olympic Games in 2000). This stimulus attracts investment for large scale visual-arts based activity, in particular public sculptural and installation works. However, recent activities led by the local government authority, the City of Sydney, reveal a change in direction for art in public space activities in order to diversify practices, and focus on smaller-scaled and temporary public art practices. The aim is to encourage a wider range of artists to participate creatively in Sydney's public sphere.

From an international perspective, case study research in Istanbul, Turkey, allowed me to consider the richness of protected world heritage sites in the context of a contemporary living city. Istanbul in 2010, as part of the city's European Union's Capital of Culture (ECOC) celebrations,³ was known as a 'Museum City'. This was appropriate for a city famed for its ancient cultural heritage and multiple cultural influences that have arisen from its location between Europe, the Middle East and Asia.

Cities, heritage and the curation of contemporary art

The Museum City construct, which I came across in my research of Istanbul, allowed me to consider the contemporary city in context of the many ancient heritage sites, as spaces to be explored, viewed and engaged from a museological perspective. The framing of Istanbul as an ECOC created a 'deadline urbanism' focus around contemporary cultural activities in an urban site rich with ancient

cultural heritage. Through exploring this construct of a curated city, the Museum City concept influenced my ideas around developing a visual-arts based project in the Suzhou context, with its core foundation as a heritage city. Although I was not dealing with the city on the scale of that of the ECOC, the idea of a Museum City prompted me to consider the relationship between the locally specific heritage of Suzhou and ways in which contemporary art activities could be curated to complement and create new layers of meaning. Thus, the site of ancient urban heritage, in which to situate the creation of contemporary art practices, became the basis for the conceptual development of this project. This led to a research analysis of the location to find a suitable site in selected canal precincts of Suzhou.

Site investigations for the Lumens project

Through the process of considering appropriate practices in such sensitive sites, our research team considered ephemeral forms of artwork that would not only highlight the aesthetic integrity, but also have no environmental impact on these delicate spaces. This led to a consideration of art forms such as contemporary photography and video work that could be projected in these spaces yet would leave no lasting impact on them. It also led to inviting Australian academic and photographer, Shane Hulbert to join our research team for his curatorial advice on suitable artistic content for the project.

During the process of identifying the appropriate canal sites, the researchers from Suzhou and Melbourne visited four sites: Shang Tang Street, Ping Jiang Road, and the water villages of Zhou Zhuang and Tongli on the outskirts of the city. Two of the sites, Shang Tang Street and Zhou Zhuang Village, had been heavily refurbished and were popular destinations earmarked as commercial and cultural tourism precincts. As a result, the research team dismissed these precincts as they were already activated with designated characteristics and therefore could no longer represent a site of a local and living community. The research team became more interested in finding places that were still integrated in the everyday lives of the communities of Suzhou, rather than token commercial spaces used primarily for tourism purposes. Ping Jiang Road and Tong Li village remained as pedestrian-orientated sites where local communities were still active. These two canal sites continue to be part of the living culture of the city.

Through this process our research team decided on the development of a contemporary photography and video art projection project, selecting Ping Jiang Road for its central location. Ping Jiang Road is a canal strip of approximately one kilometer in length. It is a self-contained pedestrian site popular with the locals. The precinct is both residential and commercial, attracting many locals in the evening through the presence of restaurants and teahouses. Our research team considered temporary, projected, contemporary photography and video art works would communicate the relationship between Australian and Chinese artists in an effective way. The site, along the pedestrian strip, contained many lime-washed white wall spaces suitable for projection. Through negotiation with our local research partners and the local precinct management company we gained permission to turn Ping Jiang Road into the curated urban space we were seeking. The research resulted in *Lumens Festival: Curating the ancient city*, a projection festival held over three nights in May 2012. It featured the works of artists from both Jiangsu Province, China and Victoria, Australia, in twenty locations along Ping Jiang Road.

The development of research resulting in the *Lumens Festival* gave me an invaluable opportunity to explore and discuss the curatorial and urban research context of the site of Suzhou, and to put into practice theoretical concerns informing my research on curating urban spaces. The *Lumens* selection of works were also shown at Federation Square, Melbourne from December, 2012 to February, 2013, which allowed the international research team to continue the rich dialogue between Suzhou and Melbourne.

Notes

1. The invention of Silk began in China around 140 BCE and spread to India, Japan the Middle East, Europe and Japan. The silk industry originated and was based in the Suzhou region of China.
2. A megacity refers to an extremely large city with a population over 10 million people.
3. Istanbul was selected as one of three cities (alongside Pec, Hungary and Essen, Germany) to take part in the European Union's Capital of Culture (ECOC) program in 2010. The selection of Istanbul for these celebrations was part of Turkey's bid to join the European Union. Culture was the focus for the ECOC year and was celebrated through visual art exhibitions, theatre, musical performances, film screenings, literary events, traditional art, urban culture and heritage.

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