Introduction

1. Introduction

A design with a birds’ nest-like enclosure has been selected for the National Stadium, which will be used for the opening and closing ceremonies and track and field events in the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing. It is designed by a team that included Swiss-based Herzog & de Meuron Architekten A.G., with China Architecture Design and Research Group, and ArupSport, London. According to the design, the 220 by 330 m stadium will comprise the stand-alone three-dimensional space frame and a saddle-shaped bowl structure, the latter encompassing the seating area, field, walkways, and interior facilities. The stadium will rise to a height of 68 m, and its total floor space will be 250,000 m². This 91,000-seat stadium is shaped in a bowl of interwoven metal mesh that resembles a bird’s nest. This huge bird’s nest shaped stadium is easily held to be traditional, because it looks like a real bird’s nest—the signifier (the stadium) obviously has its signified (a bird’s nest in nature) in the signifying chain. But after reading Fredric Jameson’s *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, the author finds many elements of postmodern space in the National Stadium, and will expound the reading of the stadium as the postmodern space.

2. Postmodern Space in the National Olympic Stadium

2.1 Steel Facade—“Its skin is made of bones”
First of all, the steel facade of the stadium demonstrates traits of the postmodern space. “In architects' parlance, Herzog & de Meuron was renowned for covering facades with unusual ‘skins’” (Lubow 68). This time, the “skin” of the National Stadium is “a mass of steel beams and trusses that twist, turn, and overlap each other in a stunning form” (Hansen 12). The steel framework here, as also in any other building structures, serves as the load-bearing structure. But for the National Stadium, this basket weave of steel also composes the facade of the architecture. Here, the inner structure serves as the surface—the facade and the structure are identical. The dichotomy between the inside and outside of the ‘wall’ gets blurred.

2.2 Facade—Simple vs. Random

If the unconventional cladding is the first trait of the postmodern space, the facade composed of twisting steel trusses also clearly distinguishes the building from the austerity of Modernist architecture (Jameson 39), which “is rooted in minimal and true use of material as well as absence of ornament” (Harvey 46). Modernist architects advocate “less is more”; in contrast, the designing of the facade of the National Stadium is not “less”, but “extravagant” (Hutzler B1), which is far more complicated than the modernist style. Rebelling against the simplicity and clarity of the modernist architectures, postmodernists seek exuberance in the use of “non-orthogonal angles and unusual surfaces” (Raban 74). The National Stadium is formed by elaborate, interwoven steel hoops and twisting steel beams with its creative details. Its roof is organized in a circular pattern. All these complex structures with high aesthetic value constitute a sharp contrast with the “anonymous glass boxes” in the Modern age. “It seems that postmodernism is not content with straightforward mediocrity” (Sharp 119). In postmodernism, “anything goes” (Harvey 42).

Besides, the panels between the interlocking steel beams of the stadium are made of transparent ETFE membranes, and the whole structure is bare and exposed as “[the] postmodern spatiality hides nothing”; and “everything is now on show” (Murphet 119).

2.3 Facade—Signs of Self-Denial

Furthermore, the interwoven steel beams stand as the example of the “iconography of disinformation” (Outram 10). The use of diagonal and cross lines on the facade indicates the “erasing” and “denial” of the subject matter. Like what happens in a “non-smoking” sign, the information carried by the architecture is denied by the slashes and crosses on its facade (Outram 10). In other words, although the whole structure resembles a bird
nest (for its symbolic meaning in the logocentric tradition), it is meant to be looked at from a totally new perspective—to be deconstructed.

### 2.4 Fragmented Spaces

As we have discussed, the stadium is shaped in a bowl of interwoven metal mesh that resembles a bird's nest. Apart from its unusual facade, the stadium is also featured by the “lattice-work” woven by the steel. “The Bird's Nest, as the Olympic stadium, has been called for its steel lattice-work” (Spencer 020). Separating the inner space from the outside space of the stadium, the basket of intertwined steel beams produce numerous of weblike holes and fragmented spaces that erase the binary opposition between the inside and the outside. As the entrances are reduced to minimum, it seems as if the stadium does not wish to be part of “fragmented” outside space.

### 2.5 The Cultural Image—a Composite of Stereotypes of the Past

Many people think the design of the National Stadium reflects strong Chinese traditional culture and implies many images associated with Chinese traditions. More people believe the structure resembles a bird's nest, in which “the twigs that support the shape are right on the surface” (Lubow 68). Janice Tuchman and Andrea Ding-Kemp confirm this view in their explanation of the designing process of the stadium:

The stadium is ...culturally Chinese. Swiss architect Herzog & de Meuron, collaborating with avant-garde Chinese artist Ai Weiwei, took inspiration from the auspicious natural form of a bird's nest. Facade and structure are identical, and structural elements mutually support each other and converge into a grid-like formation - almost like a bird's nest with its interwoven twigs. (26)

The design of bird’s nest is also favored by Chinese architects:

Li Hu points out that the bird's-nest analogy for Herzog & de Meuron's stadium is a positive one: "In China, a bird's nest is very expensive, something you eat on special occasions." Culinary associations aside, a bird's nest is a harmonious natural object (Lubow 68).

From the stadium, some see a giant steel bird's nest; some regard it as an ancient Chinese pottery; others compare it to the wooden lattices in a Ming window. Here, with the stadium, Chinese tradition culture has turned into “a composite of stereotypes” and traditional signifies—bird’s nest, ceramics, wooden lattices, baskets, jades, and the grand palace with red walls. Nostalgia is refracted through the architectural styles of the past. As Fredric
Jameson observes in his *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, the past is itself modified; and history becomes “a vast collection of images” (18). All these images can no longer set out to represent the past; they can only “represent” our ideas and stereotypes about the past (Jameson 25).

### 2.6 Consumer Culture in the Stadium

According to the design, commercial and entertainment amenities will be developed around the stadium for its use after the Olympics (Wang 8). Janice Tuchman and Andrea Ding-Kemp give a more detailed description in this aspect: “The [designing] team also gave a lot of consideration to ‘legacy uses’--how the stadium would function after the Olympics are over. A hotel is being built into the complex, for example, along with two levels of commercial development that will open after the games” (26). The National Stadium is the main sports venue for the 2008 Olympic Games, but at the same time, the commodification and aestheticization of the stadium also serve business, shopping, and leisure functions.

Lefebvre notes that in addition to there being a space of consumption, or, for that matter, a space as the impact area for collective consumption, there is also the consumption of space, or space itself as an *object* of consumption (Gottdiener 125). Similar to the places in tourism, the stadium itself actually turns into a commodity consumed by the spectators, who pay the price not only for the games but for consuming of the place.

### 3. Social Implications in the Stadium

Up to now, we have discussed how postmodern space manifests itself in the National Stadium in Beijing. The exploration of postmodern elements in the stadium adds more social implications to this architecture. According to Gottdiener, “space is a physical location, a piece of real estate, and simultaneously an existential freedom and a mental expression. Space is both the geographical site of action and the social possibility for engaging in action” (123). Henri Lefebvre’s categorization of space has both concrete and abstract forms, and it is the same case with the National Stadium in Beijing. The stadium is concrete in having a given substance with its outside weave of steel and the inside bowl structure. It is abstract in becoming “the bearer of a whole series of new relations additional to its substantiality” (Henri Lefebvre quoted in Gottdiener 12). “The National Stadium, whose intersecting lines and naturalistic contours call to mind a bird's nest, is meant to be seen as a symbol of Beijing’s forward thinking” (Herb D2). The stadium has been regarded the centerpiece of a vast building project that is transforming the city for the 2008 Olympic Games. Besides traditional
values, we can see postmodern elements in the architecture. Moreover, it can be seen as the embodiment of the strength and skills employed in the sports games as in its structure of a synthesis of tough and tender, of powerful forms and delicate details.

4. Conclusion

Space is open to interpretations. This paper is an only a tentative attempt in investigating how postmodern space manifests itself in the National Stadium in Beijing. Among many reasons supporting the argument, the most telling ones lie in the interwoven steel facade of the stadium—the identical facade and load-bearing structure; the random arranged steel trusses, the basket weave of steel on which the subject matter is denied by its own slashes and crosses. At the same time, the “lattice-work” also produces numerous fragmented spaces that erase the binary opposition between the inside and the outside. With this stadium, bird’s nest, ceramics, wooden lattices, and other images associated with Chinese tradition culture have turned the past into “a vast collection of images” and “a composite of stereotypes” (Jameson 18). Finally, the commercial and entertainment facilities around the stadium meet the different consumer demands and integrate the stadium into the commercialization and consumer culture in the postmodern society. To some extent, the National Stadium is what Harvey described “a blend of traditional, contemporary, and newly-invented forms” (54). For me, it is more like what Broudehoux argues in post-modern revivalism—the building “that rests on the packaging and commodification of tradition” (113). Traits of postmodern space in the National Stadium have their social implications. The elements of postmodern space in the National Stadium can be seen “a symbol of Beijing's forward thinking” (Herb D2). The stadium is a reflection of development of civilization; and it will, to some extent, influence and promote the development of culture in China.

Endnotes

It is “the stand-alone three-dimensional space frame” as mentioned above.

The sentence is quoted from Lubow 68.

References


Oon, Clarissa. “Beijing's attempts to increase its global influence through 'soft power' are being hampered by lack of agreement on what constitutes Chinese culture and values.” The Straits Times November 12, 2006: 1.


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