

Expression in Ethnic Architecture of Hohhot

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Abstract

Public buildings are an important part of urban cultural material. Behind the image of public buildings created by means of architectural symbols, there are the grand representations of the city image and even the national image, which is particularly obvious in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region; although the architectural image created by national symbols have got People's favor, but nationality comes more from the symbol rather than the building ontology. This paper takes Hohhot Railway Station and Hohhot East Railway Station as examples, in the Metropolis of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, from the perspective of semiotics, combined with the historical background and public buildings development of the autonomous region, carding the phenomenon of separation between architectural symbols and building ontology, and analyzing its reasons; to explore the new balance among ethnic symbols, nationality and modernity in the media age, in the hope of contributing to the design of public buildings in ethnic minority areas.

Keywords: Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, Public Buildings, Nationality, National Symbols, Architectural Image, Architectural Body

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Introduction

In China, a question called "medium and modern" has always plagued the architects. How to take China's own path under the influence of Western architectural thoughts has become a lingering obsession for almost all Chinese architects.

Hohhot is the capital of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region and the political, economic and cultural center. As the capital of the autonomous region, Hohhot has become more urgent to show and protect the national culture.

The population composition of Hohhot is dominated by the Han nationality, and the ethnic minorities are dominated by the Mongolian nationality. The history of Hohhot's construction in modern times was very difficult. In 1912, Hohhot opened a commercial port during the Beiyang government and established the Suiyuan Special Administrative Region. In 1937, the Japanese and Mongolian government formulated the urban plan of Hohhot, built a new area to communicate among Guihua City and Suiyuan City and the railway station. The Construction was suspended in 1946 due to the civil war. After the establishment of the autonomous region government in 1948, economic construction was restored, In 1951, the government of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China prepared a new urban plan, and the development of the construction industry entered a new era, in the same state as the eastern coast of China.

Buildings with ethnic minority characteristics have also continued to emerge with the development of the economy, such as the Hohhot Racecourse built in the 1960s, or the Wulanqiate theater, built in 1953. Wulanqiate means Red Theater in Mongolian. The Red Theater is an entertainment building built to celebrate the 5th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China.



Figure 1: The Hohhot Racecourse.



Figure 2: The Wulanqiate Theater

But in this time, the definition of "national form" was more based on the "Chinese nation" rather than ethnic minorities such as Mongolia; In the anti-waste movement in 1953, the

buildings built were mainly "revolutionary modern" buildings, such as the Lianying store in the 1950s, Xinhua Bookstore in the 1960s, and the Hohhot Station built in 1969.in the Zhongshan Road, and the Hohhot Station built in 1969.



Figure 3: The Lianying Store.



Figure 4: The Xinhua Bookstore.



Figure 5: The Hohhot Railway Station Built in 1969

Modern semiotics call things that can "represent" something except themselves as symbols. Therefore, in addition to its own meaning, the symbol also conveys some other specific meaning. For example, words and language are a kind of symbol. The Doric column symbolizes men and the Ionic column symbolizes women.

With the influence of postmodernism on China, architects strive to bring architectural forms into the intersection of culture, history and society, and use symbolic techniques to highlight the national image. The Mongolian-Yuan style, which has not been popular in the past two decades, has brought the urgent expectation for the expression of "nationality" to everyone.

The Hohhot Railway Station

Hohhot Railway Station was built in 1969. The architectural form is modeled on Shaoshan Station. It maintains an obvious "revolutionary modern" style. The building layout is three-sectioned, with the colonnade at the bottom, the glass window in the middle, and the roof at the top. The present Hohhot Railway Station was built in 1995 with the eight-sided clock tower in the middle as the core. The walls and windows form a ribbon-shaped combination of virtual and real. The building is like open arms to embrace the coming crowd.



Figure 6: The Shaoshan Railway Station.

In 2014, Hohhot Station was renovated. The middle dome was decorated with golden moiré and stone strips. The image is closer to the yurt. The exterior of the building uses a glass curtain wall to make a second-story facade, and the edges are decorated with tapes. Among them, it is easy to find that the designer hopes to use Buddhist symbols and yurt symbols to reflect the regional and national culture of Inner Mongolia, and express the theme of "prairie dome, green city".



Figure 7: The Hohhot Railway Station in 1990s.

However, it is actually difficult for the public to get the meaning of these symbols. In the square in front of the station, we can always hear young children pointing to the "yurt dome" and yelling, "There is a golden heart on the yurt." Obviously, the moiré symbol does not convey its connotation, and the symbols drawn on the sides of the main building are also regarded as signs of bulls or horns.



Figure 8: The Hohhot Railway Station since 2014.

This is because any sign has the ontological "signifier" and the "significant" behind it. The signifier is composed of its own material representation, and the signified is the specific concept expressed behind the representation. The two are combined by social conventions. The same is true for architectural symbols.

The complexity of the content and the diversity of forms in architectural symbols lead to diversification. For this problem, the American philosopher Pierce divided the symbols into image symbols, indicator symbols and symbolic symbols. The moiré and fret in the Hohhot Railway Station are a kind of image symbol, which expresses a kind of "image similarity" relationship between form and content; the Chinese text in the railway station is a kind of indicator symbol, which expresses a correspondence between form and content. The "yurt" on the top of the building is a symbolic symbol. The pointed roof matches the white octagonal body, and it is located in the capital of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region. The yurt is recognized by the people. Most interviewees will describe it as "feels like a yurt",

"like a yurt", and "should be a yurt"; although not everyone has lived in a yurt, but obviously this does not affect their perception of the image of the yurt.

Although the architectural image created by national symbols have got People's favor, nationality comes more from the symbol rather than the building ontology. In fact, in order to create a building that reflects the national image of Inner Mongolia, what kind of content and how to express it should be questions that architects should keep asking themselves instead of looking for and abstracting some historical elements and just making simple collages.

Many scholars once described a building like Hohhot Railway Station as "kitsch". "Kitsch" is a term put forward by Matei Calines. "Kitsch" is the opposite of original art. Art is original, while kitsch art uses imitating and plagiarizing original art and restricts itself to the inertial thinking process. In architectural context, Kitsch is to cater to the tastes of others and to please most people and blaspheme the soul.

Although the symbols themselves have multi-meaning attributes, research has found that those abstract symbols from the tradition in the Hohhot Railway Station are difficult for even experts in Tibetan Buddhist architecture to confirm. It seems that the architect intends to use ethnic decorations to bring good luck and blessings to the railway station., but in fact it is only wants to meet the public's perception needs of Inner Mongolia and cater to the aesthetic needs of managers.

This kind of abandoning the question of content and meaning, just blindly please the public and the decision makers is called "Chinese kitsch" by Mr. Li Xiaodong, it is a symbolization of formal language, symbolizing traditional architectural elements. Repeatedly copied in various buildings, and deliberately pursued a sense of identity in form; Li Xiaodong further explained that this "Chinese-style kitsch" deeply comes from the lack of self-confidence in one's own culture, and it is especially true for ethnic minorities whose culture is in a more disadvantaged position.

The Hohhot East Railway Station

Kitsch does not only refer to the practice of collage of image symbols as collage elements in buildings, but also includes designing buildings into symbols to cater to the public.

The Hohhot East Railway Station is located in the east side of the urban area of Hohhot. The construction started in December 2006 and began to be used in 2010. The building is a steel structure with three floors and a height of 45.5 meters. The theme is "Grassland Yurt, Winged Eagle, White Cloud Hometown, Blue City". The main color is white, and the roof is a thin shell grid system, which makes the roof lightesome. The dome is shaped like a yurt. The building walls are alternately combined with marble and glass curtain walls.



Figure 9: The Hohhot East Railway Station.

Although the building does not apply religious or ethnic symbols to the surface of the building, the shape of the roof is still easy to find the obsession with the Mongolian Yuan style. The dome looks like a hat from the Yuan Dynasty, and the pure white color matches the shape of a yurt, which is a good symbol of the yurt in the grassland under the blue sky; The building uses this kind of symbolic sign to avoid the simple form of graphic symbol, but the symbolic sign leads to the fracture of all parts of the building. The East Station chooses to connect the roof and the wall through the shutter, which is more like a helpless way. This approach did not bring a sense of architectural integrity, such a roof shape can even be installed on any building of similar size. What's more, when people walk into the lobby, the externally created feeling is replaced by the uniform interior decoration style of the national high-speed railway station. There is only a huge roof. It is still reminding the existence of the "yurt", but such a feeling is only under a large-span roof, not in the yurt. The national feeling brought by the symbol is no longer, when people lament the magnificence of the structure.

Except for the Hohhot East Railway Station, the number of "Mengyuan" buildings in the past ten years is very large. Among them, the Inner Mongolia ethnic minority cultural and sports center is shaped like an eagle about to spread its wings, and like the armor and robes of Mongolian soldiers in the steppe, it is also a building with obvious symbolic significance, and its expression is more complete.



Figure 10: The Inner Mongolia Ethnic Minority Cultural and Sports Center.

Mongolian Yuan style, and Islamic style, have become the architectural trend in Hohhot in recent years. This reminds people of those Continental European style buildings. Developers use various means to attract the public's attention. Although these Continental European style buildings simply borrow the gable decorations and pillars of Western classical architecture, and embed it in the surface of the reinforced concrete building. It accurately grasps the psychological needs of consumers seeking exoticism and showing their cultural level.

Regardless of the Hohhot Station built in 1995 or the Hohhot East Station built in 2010, the symbols of ethnic minorities are directly collaged on the building. For these buildings, the perception of ordinary people can only stay in the surface pattern, and it is difficult to penetrate. For the media, symbols have become totems that embody national culture. How to highlight this iconic character and reflect the characteristics of local national architecture will naturally become the core of the report. Especially in conveying the symbolic meaning of the yurt, it is regarded as the finishing touch. The People's Railway News published *Records on the Construction of Hohhot East Railway Station* on its social network, in April 2011, describing Hohhot East Railway Station as a yurt with local characteristics with an architectural concept that meets the requirements of China's harmonious development and the world's advanced station building construction technology. The nationality is embellished by symbols, not by the building itself.

The New Balance

Manfredo Tafuri analyzed: Semiotics is a communication ideology. Individual individuals and social collectives need to be connected by a unit that can repair any ruptures and resolve every conflict and contradiction. Ambiguous symbols fit perfectly. The symbol treats the building to an ideal state to society and the people. For Hohhot Railway Station and Hohhot East Railway Station, the first or last buildings that come to or leave the capital of the autonomous region, its spiritual value may be more meaningful than its actual function. The symbol of national culture is not only the expect of city managers, but also the common people's need for the recognition of city characteristics. Postmodernism attempts to strengthen the communication between architecture and people through symbolic signs.

Le Corbusier once said: Decoration is sensation, inferior, and of the same level as color, and can satisfy simple-minded people and barbarians; Harmony and proportion have the ability to inspire wisdom and attract civilized people. Decoration is an indispensable part of the vulgar, and proportion is an indispensable part of the elegant. Le Corbusier explained to us the difference between professional aesthetics and popular aesthetics, so the symbolism of architecture is an indispensable element for the stability and development of every society.

As a material entity, architecture is inherently symbolic and can point to other meanings. Architecture is the space provider for people's life and production, and carries the different material and cultural lives of people in different regions, with the experience that has developed from struggle for thousands of years, traditional architecture has always been regarded as a representative of nationality. Therefore, we find that the dispute between "nationality" and "modernity" does not originate from "nationality" but "modernity". The word "modern" expresses a sense of the times, which is to mark its own existence from the relationship between ancient and modern. Without the historical critique of "modernity", that is, the linguistic demonstration of value changes and the background of the times, "modernity" will eventually be just a fictitious "ideal type"

For Hohhot, which has been eager to enter the modern, copying the existing construction results is certainly the fastest way, but we do not need to always use existing theories to discuss things. Regardless of the architectural form, the ultimate goal is to meet the needs of people. So, it is particularly important for people's inner feelings of architecture. The feelings here do not only refer to the feeling when they enter, but the life.

Conclusion

What the information age brings is not only the rapid and efficient transmission of information, but also accelerates the pace of daily life and shortens the distance between people. People's social relations are also more affected by the information age. In the "spectacular society" that "looks" better than "what", with their own unique cultural charm, point architecture towards a common ideal vision for people.

In the information age, the meaning of the image sometimes transcends the experience of the real space. Words can make up for the shortcomings of architecture itself, lead the people's aesthetic trend, and can become a social bond that helps architects construct the "form" and "content" of symbols. Although text can make up for the inherent flaws and expressive weakness of the building itself to a certain extent, the text does not make the building itself more usable when it is used.

Since architectural symbols are inevitable, the question is what part of culture we should inherit, and what is the meaning behind the symbols. Into the user's life, architectural design is no longer just a frame and skin, and no longer an individual in a homogeneous space, but a carrier of human spirit and material. Focusing on architectural design from landscape-architecture-construction to people is the imperative.

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