THE WICKED UTOPIA

Artistic Creation for Indigenous-Inspired Utopian Thinking

YUE MAO
Msc. Urbanism
4601343

REFLECTION

Research and Design

The interesting thing about research and design in this project is that there is nothing to design after my research about Sámi and other indigenous peoples: the demonstrative 'design' of indigeneity has the danger to stereotype itself as something forgotten by modernity, the urgency is to rethink what indigeneity has to offer in societies nowadays, hence its social and environmental openness and fluidity.

Thus to pin down the value of indigeneous thinking with concrete evidence, half way of the project I decided to compare it with Utopian thinking, a western tradition that calls for very idealistic individual creativity but seems to have reached its Dystopian end in the western context. In this sense the research does not aim to find out any solution for society in either of the thinkings but to ask what can be learned from each other, what thinking process can we develop to learn broadly from things that are not yet relevant in current research.

With the retreat from existing design pattern and big ambition in research it is to a large extend a research project. Nevertheless, in the design, or more like a story board for Kiruna and Delft, I tried to dynamically weave the inspiration from indigenous and Utopian thinkings together: the tools of image construction is better developed in Utopian thinking, while the principles of design - such as individualism, affinity to landscape - are more visible from indigenous thinking. Thus, comparing to previous Utopian plans, this is not a generic solution once and for all but the imagination of localized realities; comparing to current indigenous spaces, the spaces I create here are not composed of merely indigenous elements but opens to any proposal that inspires openness and fluidity.

Relation to Studio Topic and Master Track

The studio topic 'A City of Comings and Goings' focus on migration, without doubt the research into Nomadism among indigenous peoples is relevant to the topic. For settler societies migration nowadays is seen as a forced and frightening action, in establishing flexible relationship between humans and environment, indigenous peoples are ahead in many ways.

Although politics definitely plays an important role in indigenous issues and Utopian thinking, the research and design of this project delocalizes itself from the status quo and think about what is the politics desired. In my opinion it is a step before most of the input from this master track, which involves many scientific solutions with a problem established. But how are the problems defined? Do they really need solutions or are something we should live with? In this sense this project may be a further step into the first project in the program, the cognition of our built environment. In this project, it is deepened and widened with extensive and innovative research into other time frame and spatial context.

Scientific Relevance

Intersectional Comparison of Indigenous and Utopian Thinking

Most of the indigenous research focuses on encouraging indigenous participation within indigenous communities, this however puts the non-indigenous researchers in a vague and marginal place in the 'decolonizing agenda'. The innovative part of this project is to apply indigenous knowledge in a western context, hence Utopian thinking. Thus, intensive comparative research is conducted. Very often, the comparison is demonstrated in fields other than urban and architecture studies but in performance art, literature, linguistic and anthropology. From the reference it can be observed that a wide range of literature and examples are referred to, it is due to the lack of material directly linking urban and architectural studies involving both thinkings, but it in return provides abundant material for creation.

Research-creation in the Process of Problem-making

Due to the subjectivity of research scope and goal, the project is not only supported by theoretical and

philosophical thinking but also creative and artistic contribution, hence research-creation. The creation serves as a test for myself: to what degree have I digested the research content and what would be my output.

The task of this project is not problem-finding and solving but rather problem-making. The problem made here is beyond the direct value of objective knowledge and has no methods or evaluation to follow, thus the evaluation lies in the parallel process of making and thinking. The purpose of this process is to open up the access to an alternative history of thought and stimulate collective intellectual practice.

Drawing and Writing as Making and Thinking

In the research-creation precess it is essential that thinking and making are exercised in parallel. The making in this project is represented by drawing; the practice of writing creates a new way of thinking that appropriates ideas, parts, and theoretical frameworks from many other disciplines, then which is further recreated by drawing.

Transferability of Results

Rethinking Indigenous Cultures and 'Good Society'

As a non-indigenous researcher, the bold position I stand upon in this project is to announce that indigenous values and knowledge can inspire Utopian thinking in non-indigenous societies. This represents no doubt a strong ethical point to enhance and awareness of indigenous issues: segregation and assimilation. It should be an indispensable part of our societies with its great value, while what happens in the western society is not naturally the best for everyone.

This mentality echoes one important point in decolonizing methodologies: do not research 'about' indigenous people but research as a part of the culture. Personally I struggled a lot with what can I do with indigenous issues as a non-indigenous researcher, the lesson I learned is not to take the status quo from either background for granted and dare to start from a subjective reflection, a subjective intuition of what can be connected.

Creation of Inter-subjective Knowledge

However, the subjectivity of these practices may cause incongruence among the social beings. This project tackles this dilemma by basing itself on a historical perspective and the continues common consensus. In this sense drawing and writing are the inter-subjective practices to verify the process of making and thinking. With many preempted problems in urban planning and design, this project questions the notion of objective knowledge and rethinks how we form the definition of knowledge - through the exchange of inter-subjective information.

Ethical Issues and Dilemmas

The limitation of this research-creation is its application in urban planning and design due to the limitation of nowadays planning and design itself: the mainstream practice is based on the notion of objective knowledge. As it is from the old days, the creation of this research is presented in a subjective crafting practice. Only those models that cling to power become reality, such as socialist Utopia. While research-creation flourishes in literature, music, performance art, installation art and many other radical artistic contributions, its presence in urban planning and design is mostly in critiques.

This project manages not to be critiques but an active example of making and thinking, but not visualized intensively in urban planning or design. However, instead of saying that we should adapt research-creation into the current model of planning and design, I'd rather remain skeptical of whether it is a necessary step. The practical planning and design limits itself by its territoriality and finality, while other disciplines are making its room to challenge and our perception and our definition of living environment. The physical uprising of what I construct in this research-creation is worthwhile to test the verifiability of my inter-subjective thinking, but I would say the limitation of making provides also the room for further thinking.