

New Century Garden: Talking About Public Art in Chinatown

Guest speaker John Choi

This is an edited transcript of John Choi's talk that was accompanied by a slideshow presentation given at 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art on 21 October 2011 for the forum New Century Garden: Talking About Public Art in Chinatown, produced by 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art in partnership with City of Sydney. Copyright of this text remains with the author. For video documentation of this talk visit www.4a.com.au

I would like to talk about the relationship between art and the city, as well as the relationship between the city and identity and culture through the lens of a 'new century garden' as proposed by this forum.

Firstly a bit of background: I am of Korean origin, born in Seoul, and migrated to Australia with my family when I was ten years old in 1980. Over the last 30 years the global context in relation to Korea and the Asia-Pacific region has shifted dramatically and at the same time I've witnessed enormous change in Sydney and Australia as well. I bring this up in the context of the term 'new century', which already has some level of currency particularly in our economic, political and cultural context and changing circumstances in a globalised world, and I think Sydney has a particular place in this order. To think of gardens, I think, is an interesting way to prompt a discussion around public art. I wish to reflect on gardens in a broader sense in terms of landscapes and ecology from a personal perspective and reflections.

Korea's geography is very mountainous with approximately 70% of its land mass being mountainous areas and therefore a city like Seoul, with a population of half of Australia's, fits into a very small land mass. So one does wonder where the garden fits into these emerging mega-city contexts.

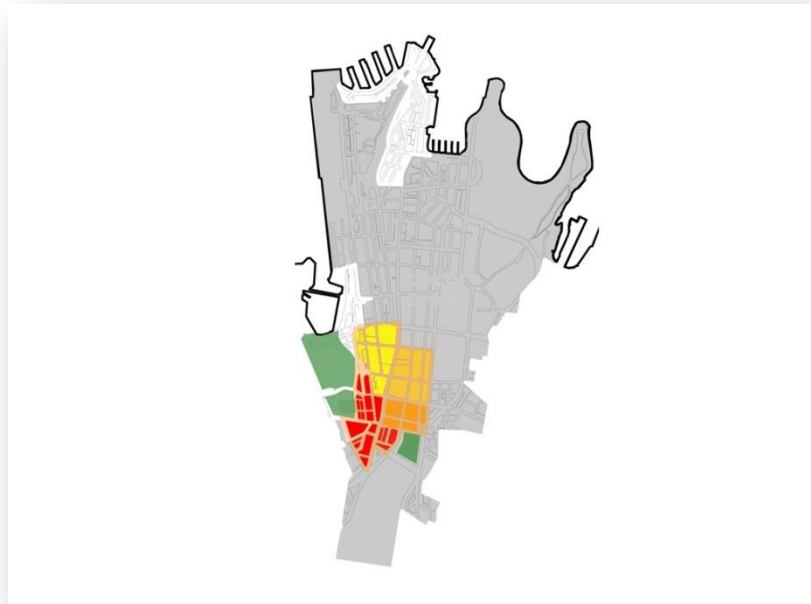


This is an area north of Seoul called Insadong that is quite well known as an art and heritage precinct with a number of interesting public art works and small galleries. But what I wish to focus attention on is the depth and breadth of the ecology that one sees reflected in the built environment as a clear indicator of the depth of creative energy of the local residents, business owners, consumers and those who run things. When I say ecology I refer to an ecology that does not separate between natural and human components but instead regards this system as inherently integrated.



Here on the left you have a French restaurant that sits within this ramshackle building where the roof still has tarpaulins over it, you can see the air con ducts haphazardly put together, and this small garden at the front. On the right is another building of 1960s or '70s origin. What is interesting for me is the degree of precision and craft in that tiled facade at street level. The area has of course some contemporary architecture but this particularly facade's interplay with recycled material, the old and the new, creates interplay between building and public life. I'm using these examples as one way to look at art in the context as a medium to represent and reflect on things, but also the deeper impact it can have in the culture of a city and really seeing art as a capacity building exercise that can operate, transform and deepen the scope of people who create, make and shape ideas in the city. When I first came to Sydney there wasn't much sense of multicultural spirit, even though there was cultural and ethnic diversity. Things were fairly thin, particularly where I grew up in St Ives. Over the course of the past thirty years things have developed tremendously. Sydney, particularly in the past twenty years, has increased the number of residents in the city, changing the character and pattern of use of the city quite dramatically, and as many of the other speakers pointed out this southern part of the city in which Chinatown is situated is a really active and interesting ecology. Of course, Chinatown has a lot of roots and focus in history and memory and is the foundation to Asian culture in Sydney itself, but where I do see Sydney being quite particular in a global context is the incredible fine diversity of Asian and non-Asian cultures in this southern part of Sydney. To give an example, if I go to my favourite Korean restaurant on Pitt Street there are quite a lot of Asians, and some non-Asians, but the majority are in fact Koreans, and I think in this sense of ownership is quite a unique thing. This sense that we already collectively own this culture is something I haven't seen in other

big international cities quite in the same way as Sydney. I think there's a little bit more distance between relationships overseas. I really do see this area of Sydney's southern central business district as indicative of Australia's latent potential in the cultural sphere. It's almost as if there's a line in Bathurst Street that delineates between north and south, what's above and what's below.



To conclude, I would like to ask how we can tap into the energies that are already latent in this area and ask ourselves how public art can reveal some of those things and build capacity so different voices and emerge within these systems.

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John Choi is founding partner of Choi Ropiha Figuera. Established in 2000, the practice is internationally recognised for their competition winning design of TKTS booth at the centre of Times Square in New York. Completed in 2008, the TKTS project has been widely recognised with awards including New York Art Commission Award, D&AD Award Environment Category, Municipal Art Society of New York MASTerworks Award, Travel + Leisure Design Award, World Architectural Festival Award, Jørn Utzon Award for International Architecture, and has been cited as New York's Building of the Decade. Other projects of note are Macquarie Street Tower, Sydney, Lune de Sang - a private rural estate in the Byron Shire hinterland, Ballast Point which received 2009 AIA NSW Commendation Award and with overall park, 2010 International Waterfront Centre Award, Manly Triangle Redevelopment Competition 1st Prize, Mona Vale Residence which received 2009 Pittwater Sustainability Award, Green Square library, and Parramatta Road Strategic Plan. In 2009, the practice received 3 Commendations in the AR Award for Emerging Architecture. John Choi is Adjunct Professor of Architecture at University of Sydney and serves on the board of 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art.