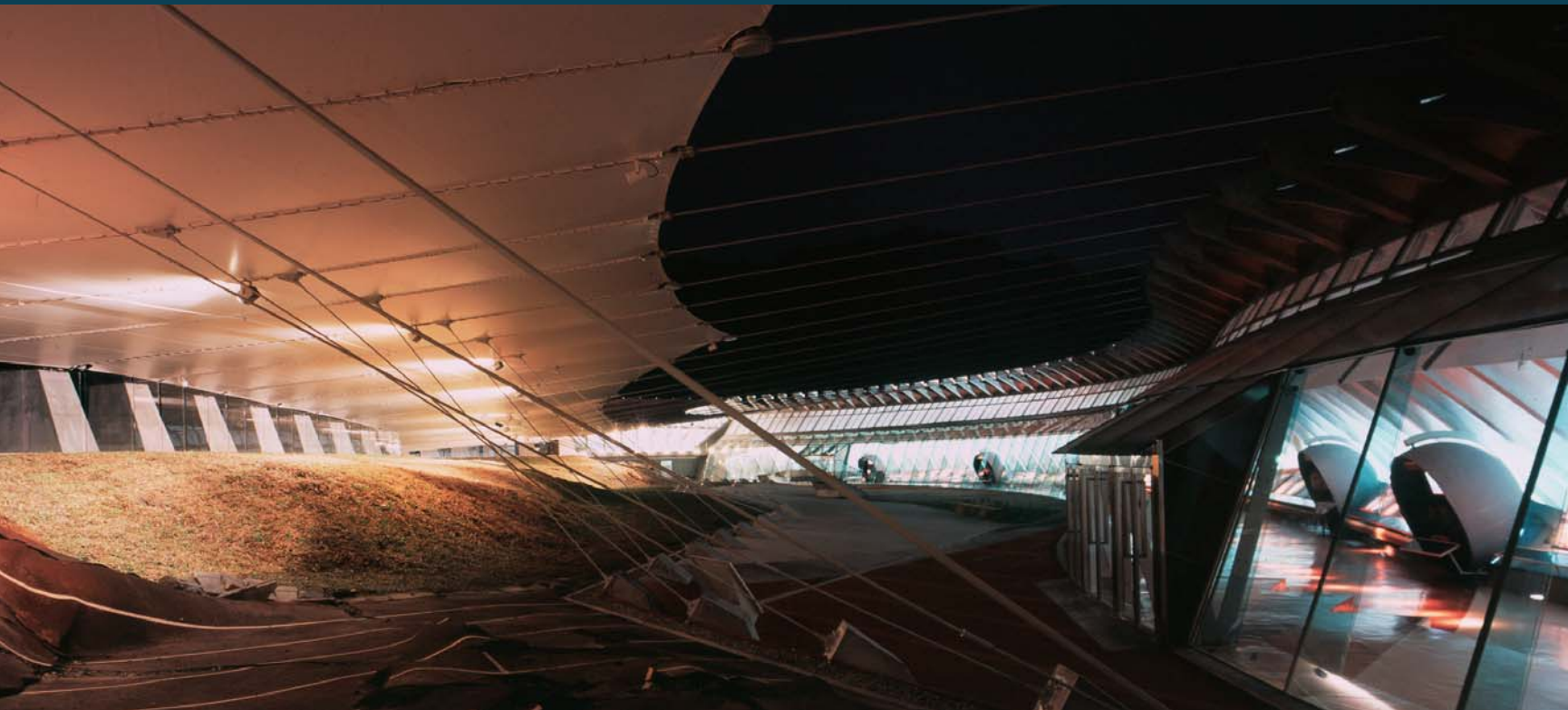


# Stitches in Time



Taiwan has come a long way from frontier outpost and colonial backwater. *Ngiom* explores a country that has found its own cultural identity – Chinese, yes, but with a distinctive Taiwanese attitude

The pictures of unruliness about Taiwan that sometimes appear on television screens abroad, of spontaneous street demonstrations, or more memorably, of legislators physically launching into one another, might give the impression that it is somehow different from mainland China, or anywhere else that the Han Chinese forms a majority.

Although Taiwan today is often thought of in parallel with events on the Mainland, its history has been quite different. The “backwater island” first came to regional prominence when the Dutch established a fort and trading post there in 1624. They were later expelled by the pirate-admiral Koxinga and his Han Chinese fleet, which took over the island in 1661. Soon Koxinga himself became an exile in Taiwan – a neat forerunner to what would happen to Chiang Kai-Shek nearly three centuries later. In 1683 the island came under direct rule by the Qing Emperor.

Before then Taiwan had mainly been populated by indigenous non-Han. It also had a partially deserved reputation among Mainlanders as a frontier island, a wild place, a place of exiles and refugees, those who had fallen out of favor or on hard times. Perhaps that’s where the rebellious streak originated?



China was later forced to cede Taiwan to Japan as a result of losing the Sino-Japanese War, which ruled its new colony with a relatively unbrutal hand for 50 years until 1945. The Japanese too faced frequent rebellions and armed revolts during their reign on the island. At one point Japan even considered selling the island to France! Hence this spirit of independence and grassroots assertiveness has a long tradition in Taiwanese history

Today Taiwanese consciousness is a multi-colored cloth stitched of many different fabrics. For one, this independent spirit is now exemplified by its entrepreneurs, while at the opposite end is an embedded Han discipline. This stitching of disparate skeins has created patterns of compromise and tolerance, which allow creativity to flourish, and makes a city like Taipei rich in experiences and extremely liveable.

Taipei is a stitching together of both planned and unplanned urban structures. Many of its older buildings which were built over public lanes have been allowed to exist, thus creating an interesting urban fabric quite unlike anywhere else. As in many Asian cities, individuality in urban structures is tolerated, avoiding staid homogeneity.



Opposite: The Earthquake Museum of Taiwan; top: from gallery looking at physical wounds; above: building stitched around a tree in Taipei

Over the last decade, the resolute individuality of Taipei’s citizens has translated into growing civic awareness, and in particular, community action groups. Planning seems to be carried from the community level upwards, therefore truly democratizing the planning process. While in many other progressive parts of the world, planners rarely get involved away from their seats in the office or academia, in Taipei they seem to have a much more hands-on approach – fisticuffing lawmakers notwithstanding. In other words, urban changes here begin at the grassroots level, as the citizenry reassert their rightful place in the decision-making process.



The contributions of professionals would then include formulating and implementing concrete plans – anything from ways of improving sewage discharge, to the greening of the environment, one example of the latter being the giant Ningxia Night Market, which has now been designated as an “Environmentally Friendly Night Market.”

Although Taiwanese food is “Chinese” on the surface, it is also somewhat Japanese in its aesthetic and culinary texture. Taiwan must be one of few places outside Japan where packed box lunches are popular. But the packaging of the boxes is more Chinese than Japanese. Food has become an inextricable part of contemporary Taiwanese culture. One overriding perception of a Taiwanese night market is the immense variety of food available. A high degree of self-regulating competitiveness ensures standards remain high. Perhaps it’s due to the Japanese influence that food presentation has a strong aesthetic component both visually and in taste. A current exhibition at the Taiwan Architecture, Design and Art (TADA) Center in Taichung in central Taiwan is about just this visual appeal of food, where portions are carefully arranged on plates purely as a visual statement. Among the exhibits is one designed by Toyo Ito, who is now building an iconic new opera house in Taichung, the winning entry of an international architectural competition.



Clockwise from top: Fractured building and new museum; Earthquake Museum as a stitching piece in the landscape; preserving earthquake building; main exhibition gallery; preserving physical sign of earthquake

A high level of creativity is beginning to emerge out of this culture of tolerance, productivity and discipline, including a steady stream of public and private patrons. For example, the Xue Xue Institute, which was formed in Taipei to “promote an aesthetic economy, to assist creative industries, to develop stimulating lifestyles, and to foster human fulfilment” is a major privately funded institute that encourages creativity. On the other hand, TADA is set up by public funds. It is housed in a converted brewery, and among its goals is to help “stimulate the art, design and architectural industries to work together.... and hope their

interactions will generate creative sparks,” with funding coming from the city’s Council for Cultural Affairs. It currently has a major library for the design disciplines as well as several large exhibition halls solely for the promotion of creativity and design.

Taiwan today seems to be about stitching together of various phenomena – of cultures, of a disjointed history, of conflicting sentiments between fragments of the past and a cohesive vision of the future, all held together through creativity and innovation.

One of Taiwan’s striking examples of creative enthusiasm in contemporary architecture, is the Earthquake Museum of Taiwan, construction of which still continues today. Ironically, it too is a metaphor of “stitching” – in this case, of a physical event which occurred at 1:47 am on September 21, 1999, when a massive 7.3-magnitude earthquake struck Taiwan, taking a heavy toll in both lives and property. The museum’s architect, Jay Chiu, says that the architecture was designed to sew both seismic and psychic wounds. “The fault lines are the wounds of the earth, and architecture is a tool to sew up and begin the process of healing.” He pointed out that the 400-meter running track is a metaphor of commemoration, with one of its 100-meter straights transformed into an exhibition hall. The fault line, or wound is preserved at the curve of the track – the architecture becomes the surgical thread, creating a suture that intertwines around the wound and becomes a place of healing.

A membrane covers the “wound” around the track and protects it from the elements. The wound identifies the exact location of the

Chelungpu Fault and the nature of the Taiwan quake which saw an uplift at this spot of 150 to 250cm of soil. The main museum is a meandering hallway which snakes around the site, with part of it going underground and then re-emerging again into daylight. It takes into account the vistas of the preserved post-quake school building and takes a visual account of the breadth of the quake’s devastation.

The Earthquake Museum of Taiwan is an architectural poetic rendition rising out of calamity. It also is a metaphor of Taiwan today. As it sews up physical wounds, it becomes also the metaphor of a nation finally emerging with a new self-consciousness out of a disparate past – from a backwater locality towards a vibrant, particolored cloth, and a future stitched together with tolerance as well as avenues for dissent, and even with a certain desirable degree of edginess and chaos, yet also humane, and thus enduringly hopeful. **111**

