

# Spatial Atmosphere and Informal Contemplation Spaces

Chang He, University of Florida

## Abstract

With the emergence of more and more mega cities in China, high-density buildings and urban infrastructure have changed the overall inhabiting atmosphere and spatial identity of a city. Religious meditation and preaching spaces should be involved in modern urban context and provide people with a place for spiritual enlightenment and a retreat for contemplation. This paper proposes that what architects can do for urban spiritual contemplation is to design the specific architectural spatial language for shaping and reshaping urban spaces and create a type of informal space for varied forms of contemplation within the existing formal urban structures.

In different spatial atmospheres, people's behaviors can be evoked and oriented through spatial scales and constructs. When architectural space serves as an ideological means for political classes to maintain their social ethics and orders, we usually define such an architectural space as the "formal" space which helps establish existing rules. By living in formal spaces, we accept the identity that society has given us and act according to our social identities in such a formal space. As demonstrated in Chinese landscape paintings and gardens, the more we aspire to the spiritual perception and self-identity of the human individual, regardless of different religious interpretations of the self, the more we desire an "informal" atmosphere of architectural space for inner freedom. In Chinese architectural history, we can observe informal architectural spaces satisfying human desires, such as the traditional scaffolding industry (搭棚业) for courtyard dwelling (四合院) in ancient Beijing and the temporary "informal construction" attached to the Changyin Pavilion (畅音阁), the imperial theater in Forbidden City.

The new architectural informal language and construction techniques can intervene the existing solemn and hierarchical architectural context to change the spatial atmosphere and bring in the new multiple spatial functions of religions to existing buildings.

Inspired by the tenon-and-mortise joint craft of Chinese classic architecture, the research seeks an informal spatial structure as the basic text of an architectural language, which provides evocative architectural spaces for contemplation

through flexible, variable and ecstatic spatial configuration and transformation, just as the mind in meditation changes and cleanses in space and time and the soul can thus transcend to eternity.

Three eremitic images that are often mentioned in Taoism: "Debate on the Happiness of Fish (鱼乐之辩)," " Hermit in Between (中隐)" and " Peripateticism (逍遥游)" have been chosen as historical allusions in my project for creating three corresponding architectural gestures of contemplation: "gazing at a scene," "sitting in silence" and "wandering in absolute freedom." These designed informal contemplation spaces are intended to change people's psychological state and satisfy the desire for a retreat where the soul can find itself. Such an informal contemplation space acts in more freedom and flexibility than the religious institutional space and returns the contemplation behavior to the scale of daily life and human body. Modern architecture creates the miracle of fancy skyscrapers and fashionable buildings, but "informally" constructed spaces can find a better home for spiritual contemplation.



Figure 1. "Debating on the Happiness of Fish (鱼乐之辩)," an informal contemplation pavilion, designed by author, 2019