

Reflections on the Community Participation Process in the Preservation and reuse of the U.S. Military Officers' Housing Complex in Shanzihou District, Yangming Shan, Taipei

陽明山山仔后美軍宿舍保存再利用的社區參與歷程反省

Reflections on the Community Participation Process in the Preservation and reuse of the U.S. Military Officers' Housing Complex in Shanzihou District, Yangming Shan, Taipei

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Abstract

As soon as the Korean War broke out in the 1950s, the U.S. Government assisted in defending Taiwan by sending military groups. The U.S. military selected Shanzihou District in Yangming Shan as officers' temporary residences. But, from then on, the military housing complex in Shanzihou was taken over by Bank of Taiwan. Due to the historical, architectural, and ecological significance of the U.S. Military Housing Complex in Shanzihou, a cry for preservation has been rising. We take the chance to participate in the preservation and reuse of the complex, and thus have much reflection through the interaction with the local community. The essay will first introduce the spatial characteristics of the housing complex and its values; next examine the process of the preservation movement. The main focus will be on how we involve ourselves in the movement, what problems of the community we discover, and how we interpret our own role. Finally, we bring up an initial planning proposal, hoping to stimulate more discussion of the issue.

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As soon as the Korean War broke out in the 1950s, the U.S. Government sent the Military Assistance and Advisory Group (MAAG) to Taiwan and the Seventh Fleet of the U.S. Navy into the Taiwan Strait so as to prevent Communism from spreading. The U.S. military selected Shanzihou District in Yangming Shan, Taipei to be the site for the MAAG officers' temporary residences. From then on, the military housing complex in Shanzihou was taken over by Bank of Taiwan, which then served as the official receiver of capital assistance from the U.S.

However, in 2005 Bank of Taiwan publicly revealed its intention to auction the land where the Military Complex is located, total measurements reaching 42000 level ground. In particular, the land to be sold is the most even as well as the best part of Yangming Shan. The U.S. Military Housing Complex has been faced with crisis of demolishing.

Due to the historical, architectural, and ecological significance of the U.S. Military Housing Complex in Shanzihou, a cry for preservation has been rising. We take the chance to participate in the preservation and reuse of the Complex, and thus have much reflection through the interaction with the local community. The essay will first introduce the spatial characteristics of the housing complex and its values; next examine the process of the preservation movement. The main focus will be on how we involve ourselves in the movement, what problems of the community we discover, and how we interpret our own role. In the end, we bring up an initial planning proposal, hoping to stimulate more discussion of the issue.

1. Spatial characteristics

Shanzihou means "the back of the mountain" in Taiwanese. "Shan" refers not to Shamao Mountain in the north, but Grass Mountain in the southeast. Shanzihou is located below the Yangmingshan National Park and thus is the place travelers must pass through. In addition, Shanzihou is the largest and flattest village in the whole Yangmingshan area, so it is favorable for residence.

In 1952, Yangmingshan Management Bureau employed U.S. assistance capital to expropriate farmlands and later built Western style houses for U.S. military officers. U.S. Military Officers' Housing Complex in Yangming Shan included districts from A to H, totaling 217 rooms. These houses were built based on not only needs of different periods but also the numbers of family members of the U.S. military officers coming to Taiwan. Officers and their family were allocated to different types of houses according to military status. The size, interior allocation, garden space, distance between neighbor houses, and style of architecture vary from district to district. In particular, the H1 district, which was built in rather late period, was integrated with Taiwanese culture and applied local architectural skills and materials.

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Now, only five districts, C1, C2, F, H1, and H2, still remain in the housing complex in the Shanzihou District. Spatial characteristics analyses of these existing districts are as follows.

Near the U.S. Military Officers' Housing Complex, Chinese Culture University, established in 1962s, lies in the west part of the Shanzihou District. Because of the establishment of Chinese Culture University, the industry structure in Shanzihou District has been transformed to service industry. Many students rent houses here as their dormitory. Hence, the Chinese Culture University students become the essential composers as well as participants in the Shanzihou community. Aside from students and local inhabitants, mountain climbers and travelers are also important actors in Shanzihou. On vacations, many visitors and travelers walk along the Tian-Mu Historic Trail⁷ to Yangming Shan, and are bound to pass through the Shanzihou District.

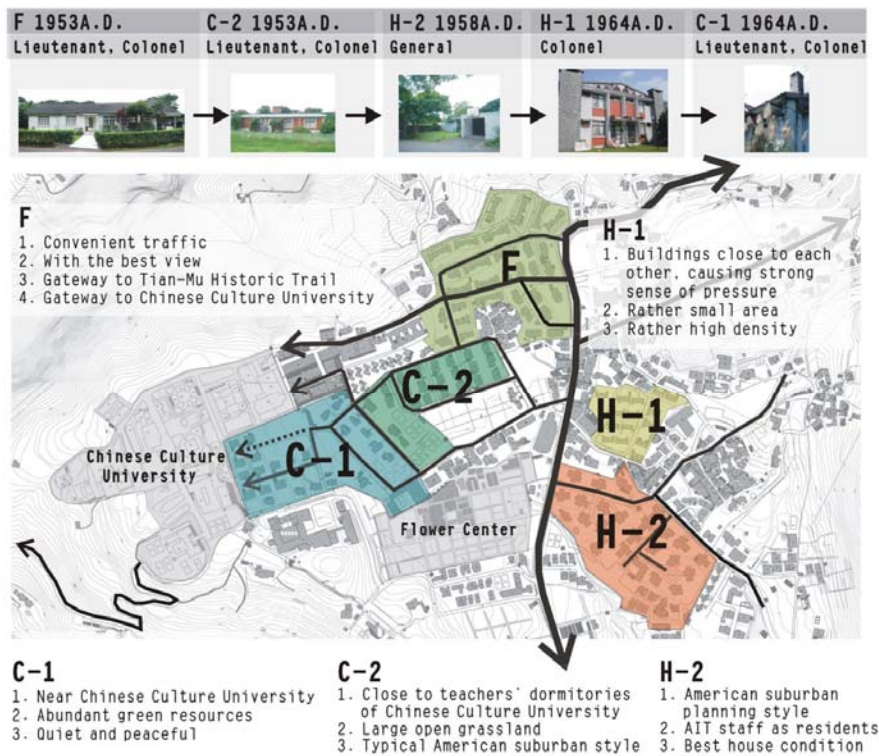


Fig. Features of U.S. Military Housing Complex Districts (Source: group data)

⁷ Tian-Mu Historic Trail has existed from the period of Japan colonization. The trail connects Lengshueikeng, the Shanzihou District, and the Tian-Mu area. In the past when the transportation was not quite convenient, the historic trail was responsible for communication and resources exchange between the Shanzihou District and Taipei. However, the trail was once forgotten because of the generally improved transportation. It is not until the government popularizes climbing activities did Tian-Mu Historic Trail resumed its function of entertainment.

2. Values of the U.S. Military Officers' Housing Complex

The Shanzihou District is located under the Yangmingshan National Park. Nowadays, the U.S. Military Officers' Housing in this district is the largest in scale and the most complete U.S. Military Officers' Housing Complex in Taiwan.

Historically, the Housing Complex in Shanzihou District not only plays an important role to witness the relationship between Taiwan and America under the background of Cold War, but also reflects American cultural colonization in Taiwan.

Architecturally, the U.S. Military Officers' Housing Complex follows the style of American modern architecture and suburban residence. In other words, the Housing Complex in Taiwan is a horizontal transplantation of American modern architecture and suburban houses under the Cold War. In addition, its affiliated housing facilities, such as kitchen counters and boilers, were symbolic of "modernization" at that time. It shows how Taiwan initiated its contact with modernity and epitomizes Taiwan's modernization course. In short, the Housing Complex carries great significance in the architectural history in Taiwan (Hsia & Lin, 2007).

Ecologically, due to its site specificity, Shanzihou serves as an ecological buffer strip as well as a transitional greenbelt between the lower Taipei City and the upper Yangmingshan National Park. Today, other residential areas on Shanzihou have been constituted into apartment buildings and mansions with high density. Only the U.S. Military Officers' Housing Complex was built with low-density pattern and still equipped with gardens. The green resources here help control temperature, purify the air, and keep good vision and space quality.

However, Bank of Taiwan is going to auction this land full of historical, architectural, and ecological meanings for development in order to earn money. Once developed, the U.S. Military Officers' Housing Complex will disappear for good. We will be deprived of not only cultural properties, but also a sustainable ecological environment. Above all, it is absolutely impossible to restore the destroyed environment. Therefore, this issue is eager and worth to be concerned.

3. Process of Preservation

In 2005, "Shanzihou Culture and History Studio" was established by two enthusiastic community residents for the purpose of promoting preservation. The objectives of the movement hold the ecological and historical significance of the Housing Complex in high esteem. Moreover, we also attempt to re-clarify the ownership of the U.S. Military Officers' Housing Complex to see if Bank of Taiwan can claim the right to the land. In terms of propagating strategies, in addition to spreading message and forging alliance with other groups through the Internet, the

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advocates strove hard to communicate with the residents in Shanzihou for their support and identification. On the other hand, they fought for chance from the government. Department of Culture Affairs held accreditation of the Housing Complex several times in 2005. Up to the present, 22 among 141 buildings have been declared historical buildings. Nevertheless, the advocates were not satisfied. They were eager to protect and preserve more of the buildings.

In early 2006, Shanzihou Culture and History Studio held a design competition for the preservation of the U.S. Military Officers' Housing Complex. In the end, the competition produced 16 preservation and reuse plans, which spurred the Department of Urban Development Taipei City Government to announce bans on building till December, 2008, and to promise to modify the detailed plan in the future. Now we must take the responsibility to move the preservation work forward in these two years.

4. Obstacles to Preservation: Analysis on the Problem of the Community

In order to tackle with the auction crisis, we cooperated with Shanzihou Culture and History Studio, the grass root community organization. The Studio takes charge of propaganda and political negotiation, while we are responsible for spatial analysis and area planning. We hope to produce a practical reuse plan not only to win more support for preservation, but also to prompt the public department to give more weight to this issue. However, during the process of interaction with the community, we discovered some problems worthy of concern.

Problems the Community Come up against

The composition of residents in Shanzihou is complicated. After the construction of the Military Housing Complex, the U.S. Military Officers' and their families added more diversity and vitality to the place, which was previously composed of farmers. Nowadays the community consists of staffs from the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT), Taiwanese tenants, Chinese Culture University students and farmers living in the surrounding Yangming Shan areas. Different backgrounds and lifestyles of the residents result in the heterogeneity of the region.

To make the following discussion clearer, we must first clarify the subject of the Shanzihou community. By "community" we refer to people living in Shanzihou now, including tenants of the U.S. Military Officers' Housing Complex, residents outside but around the Complex, Chinese Culture University staffs and students, and farmers in Yangming shan.

To the present, although this issue has been better-known, the power is yet strong enough to effect the public department to take any practical actions. Those who re interested in preservation and reuse are few—only a few tenants, surrounding

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residents, and farmer groups. They kept fighting alone with the passive government. There are three major difficulties in improving community participation:

(1) Ambiguity of Subjectivity

We have been in touch with some residents just now, and have obtained their opinions on this site. Through several interviews and activities, we found that even though many people pass by the site everyday, they hardly stay there. The diversity and heterogeneity of the groups in Shanzihou lead to the region's lack of obvious subjectivity. The problem can be explained from three aspects: First, many tenants left upon knowing that Bank of Taiwan, the property owner, intended to auction the land. So far only 40% tenants stay in the Military Housing Complex. Numbers of tenants are getting fewer and fewer. Second, since most people do not sense any direct threat to their present lives, only very few residents are concerned about the issue. Third, even though Chinese Culture University students are one of the major composers of the Shanzihou community, the circulations of students make them hard to build a strong tie with the community. Thus, they rarely provide any feedback on this region except for economic benefits. In consequence, the subjectivity of the U.S. Military Officers' Housing Complex is full of ambiguity. "Fight for whom" and "plan for whom" become the most pivotal questions in planning.

(2) Incohesiveness of Community Strength

Owing to the ambiguity of subjectivity, residents' cohesiveness is feeble as well. After entering the community, we found that residents' perspectives on the issue are quite diverse. Some consider it impossible to interfere with government policy; others do not object to further exploitation if the present ecological environment isn't obviously destroyed. In general, most residents take a relatively conservative and passive attitude toward the issue. On the other hand, vision of the site is yet concrete. Imagination toward the use of the place still needs to be evoked. In sum, so far not many people involve themselves in the preservation, let alone a strong consensus. The community's strength is yet to be consolidated.

In addition, despite the geographical affiliation and academic resources of Chinese Culture University, staff and students do not pay much attention to their surroundings; nor are they active in the preservation work. In a word, there is a gap between Chinese Culture University and its peripheral community, therefore weakening the strength of the community. In fact, the so-called community proponents in Shanzihou consist merely of few enthusiastic tenants and residents, lacking in sample representativeness. With limited strength, it is difficult for the community to contend with the public department.

3. Common Negligence of "Community Affairs"

The reason why common people do not pay much attention to the crisis faced by

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the U.S. Military Housing Complex may be as follows. First of all, the auction plan of the property owner Bank of Taiwan has temporarily been stopped for the time being, so most people do not worry about the Housing Complex since it is not in an emergency. Moreover, the U.S. Military Officers' Housing Complex is not a popular scenic spot. The external world does not know much about the history of Shanzihou. In addition, it is hard for common people to get rid of the idea that "development equals progress." Capital pursuit is always more alluring than abstract historical and cultural values. Finally with regard to the tenants' background, the income and social status of them are generally above average. In the face of the environmental crisis, the preservation appeal of the tenants is easily associated with pursuit of self-interest, and thus hard to win common support compared with minority group issue.

5. In Retrospect: Interaction with the Community

During the course of interaction, we found that community has difficulty integrating diverse subjects and reaching consensus. However, we must also reflect upon our own role in relation with the community. In fact, the relationship between the community and us has been limited to some active organizations and sporadic persons. We have kept asking ourselves what kind of role we have to play as a professional group in interaction with the local community. In this case, the most essential relationship is our tie with the Shanzihou Culture and History Studio. However, we have been depending on the personal network of the Studio too much, lacking in community basis established on our own.

Hence, we failed to unite more other proponents except for the residents already Identified with the Studio's objectives. Many stores owners and residents in Shanzihou, or even the tenants of the Housing Complex, still neither understand the purpose of preservation nor identify with the movement. In addition, since different views and interests conflict in the community, we often vacillate between resident's suggestions. For examples, one claim to protect the ecological environment, while another approve economic exploitation. Should the whole district be retained or be sold partly? Or should it be opened as the community's public space? Or should it be transformed into a commercial space? It is an arduous task to integrate those diverse comments and to look after every stakeholder's interests at the same time. In brief, we are in a blurred situation. We try to resolve the needs of the community; on the other hand, we can't reach a common consensus among every group. Such a dilemma has resulted in our hesitation in decision making and self-position.

According to the reflections mentioned, we are looking forward to not only establishing a stronger relationship with the community, but also helping the

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community to realize and get rid of its predicament. We involve in this issue as an academic team, serving as a coordinator between government and community. The role we are going to assume is to be a consultant on the preservation and reuse task. Internally, during the two years of ban on building, we are going to contact more peripheral residents as soon as possible and communicate with them. Besides, we plan to hold some community activities, such as yard work or flea market in the U.S. Military Officers' Housing Complex. Through continuous communication and activities, we hope to win more support to form a strong power against exploitation. Externally, we plan to ally with other relevant NGOs and environmentalists, culture and history workers and groups to hold some activities and campaigns, such as workshops, public meetings, and the mass media propaganda, to explicate the extent of emergency of the issue, and to construct the U.S. Military Officers' Housing Complex into a place worth visiting. When the public voice has been raised, the public department and land owner can't help but negotiate with other stakeholders. Thus, the possibilities of future development of the U.S. Military Officers' Housing Complex and the Shanzihou community may become more liberal.

6. Preliminary Planning Proposal

We adopt three core values mentioned—historical, architectural, and ecological — as our major spirit of the sustainable planning project. Historically, the preservation of Military Housing Complex enables the public face historical experience positively. Ecologically, reuse of Housing Complex and reservation of green resource represents sustainable economics and healthy lifestyle. Architecturally, these buildings designed in correspondence with climatic characteristics are consistent with the popular elements of green building nowadays.

Therefore, based on the results of our observation, interviews, and analysis, we drafted a basic planning strategy that the Military Complex should be of compound use. Its living space is approximately divided into two types: first, a community space with higher degree of openness, and second, a percentage of commercial space to support the whole Military Complex. Furthermore, two principles should be paid heed to: first, there should be no conflict use between the community and the outsiders; second, all activities and consumer purchase should stick to our ultimate spirits: low pollution as well as healthy and sustainable lifestyle.

Hence, we encourage all of the residents in the Shanzihou community to participate in the follow-up management, and improve their local identification through body labor of improving the environment. We expect that the U.S. Military Officers' Housing Complex in Shanzihou will be able to maintain its simple and healthy lifestyle, create steady economic benefit within its own distinctive atmosphere,

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leading to a sustainable Shanzihou. To sum up, we are looking forward to a "green community with rich human spirit."

7. Conclusion

The Shanzihou District has witnessed various cultures under different eras, and has developed a distinctive cultural atmosphere. However, the auction crisis cast a shadow on this place with rich historical and ecological values. Although the Department of Urban Development in Taipei City Government has already ordered a 2-year ban on building and has scheduled to revise the detailed plan at the present stage, the Shanzihou community's ill-defined subjectivity and lack of cohesion has emerged as the major obstacles to preserving the U.S. Military Officers' Housing Complex. As planners, how can we help the community residents reach common understanding within limited time so as to develop a better future for Shanzihou? If different views and interests conflict with each other in the community, how can planners keep neutral without being influenced by the suggestions from the residents?

Therefore, prior to direct community design, establishing trust with community residents is the key point in operating this issue at present. We hope that through the internal and external methods mentioned above, the community can reach consensus on the place's future, strengthen public acceptance, and reverse the development-oriented thinking common in the past. Furthermore, we hope to push the public department as well as the land owners to pay more attention to this issue and to support the preservation work. We are looking forward to a better Shanzihou District constituted not by exploitation.

Through the interaction with the community, public department, and the academic groups, we comprehend the complexities and difficulties in community involvement stage by stage. In addition to reminding ourselves to maintain an open and positive attitude with the community, we have to evaluate our own position and viewpoint strictly at the same time, in order to shun biases and blindness. We have learned from the case that the most essential are to detect the problem and limitation of the community, and to assess our own capability to help. For us, the road of community participation may just be in bud, so it is hard to expect what kind of difficulties are ahead of us. But as long as we persevere continuously, we may create a new vision for the preservation of cultural properties.

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