Cultural Infrastructure

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The projects of Kris Yao's office, Artech, collected in this magnificent volume, *KRIS YAO│ARTECH 30x30*, offer reassurance that the physical manifestation of culture is alive and well, despite the assumed hegemony of the virtual, digitized, cultural realm.

This affirmation comes as somewhat of a surprise. When looking for culture today, our first instinct is to plug in. Expending only seconds to tap over to www.louvre.fr will provide you with hours on end of face to face with the *Mona Lisa*, the *Venus de Milo*, Vermeer's *Lacemaker*, and countless other masterworks. Sure, it's not the real thing, but it's also crowd-free: you can look closely (simply by clicking "magnify a masterpiece!"), read the descriptions, and link to other writings and other images. It's all tied into our contemporary plug-in culture: tailored to every individual's specific cultural needs, customized by clicks, and always available. The same is true with music: plug in your headphones, fire up youtube, and the concerts of the world will immediately become available, with views of the performers that even the most expensive house seats can never provide.

Such cultural accessibility is nothing short of extraordinary: the world has gotten smaller as audiences plug in simultaneously across its circumference. And yet, while liberating and democratizing, our contemporary plug-in culture poses a direct challenge to architecture: what is the role of the museum or the performance hall in an age when art, music, and culture are available to us on a one-to-on basis, 24/7?

The projects in this volume remind us that culture fosters a physical infrastructure that's as potent as our networked one — perhaps even more so. While new publics, new audiences, are forever being created and recreated with clicks and "likes" over the web, they are also repeatedly reformulated through venues that are *public* in entirely new ways.

In 1962, the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas coined the term "the public sphere" in his book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Habermas identified the rise of the bourgeoisie as a class in the 19th century that was enabled by the parallel rise of particular venues for public discourse, places where the public could exchange and form opinions as a public. Such venues included cafes, museums, and newspapers — all places that Habermas understood to provide such possibilities for public opinion. He deliberately differentiated the private sphere (family, individuality, etc.) from the public sphere, which he saw as a singular entity — consensus — arising from public discussion.

In today's globalized world, that division between the private and the public is almost impossible to discern, as people "chat" from the privacy of their own homes. And yet, strangely, there is a way in which the web reinforces the singularity of Habermas's model: the internet may open us to the entire world, but people control their "movement" across its network through consensus — if you perpetually "like" your way through links, you'll perpetually remain within a milieu that is "like" you.

The increased porosity of international borders, combined with the greater ease of global travel (while a fourteen and a half hour flight from Los Angeles to Taipei may seem long, it's nothing compared to what it used to take before one could fly nonstop for distances that great), means that the public of the physical realm is becoming ever more heterogeneous. It may be counterintuitive, but the public realm of our physical world might very well be more contemporary than its digital counterpart.

Kris Yao's buildings create places and spaces for public interaction. By rendering culture and its history physical, these projects foster a public exchange, formulating relationships among individuals who may or may not speak the same language, but who can all read culture through form, geometry, pattern, materials, and landscape. In some projects, the metaphors are very overt and easy to grasp — the double lotus of the Wuzhen Theater, the scripture made into a screen at the Water-Moon monastery. In others, the references are more allusive — the granite peaks of the Langyang Museum emerging like mountains, the calligraphic strokes of the Palace Museum.

Ultimately, each one of these projects carries multiple references — some linguistic, some natural, some artistic — ensuring that every visitor will discover references for him or herself. Additional visits will only build upon these references, like the physical version of clicking through links on the internet. While each project is different, fed by the particularities of its site or history, the constants across the ensemble of these public works include a repeated insistence upon the weight of material. Culture is not an evanescent but a solid infrastructure, manifest in brick, stone and concrete. Forms also resonate across Yao's public oeuvre: while one cannot point to a stylistic idiom, the projects' collective spaces are always made visible through their monolithic geometries.

Kris Yao here constructs a cultural infrastructure that marks our collective, public lives, as much as our other physical infrastructures have done over the past centuries – the civil infrastructures of public works that harnessed the earth's resources and the highway systems that fed postwar urbanism. At their inception, these civil and public works defined national publics by networking them together, but today, the environmental, ecological repercussions that these systems have wrought have tarnished the optimism that once marked those definitions. While the entire world struggles to address these challenges, it is critical that we find other means of defining our public so as to avoid the isolated paradox of today's digital connectivity.

With his series of cultural projects, Kris Yao is taking part in the construction of a cultural infrastructure whose physicality as well as its inevitably ever more heterogeneous and globalized collective, promises to foster the advance of our contemporary public sphere.