

Jeremy Tambling, Louis Lo, *Walking Macao, Reading the Baroque*, Hong Kong University Press, 2009, pp. 254. With colour illustrations.

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*Walking Macao, Reading the Baroque*, is a broad study of the architecture that has been assembled in Macau across centuries of urban history and development. Although the authors present the book as an itinerary, it is very different from the usual itineraries addressed to Macau visitors. Not only does it go off the beaten track, or refuses the kind of strategy that is only interested in attracting consumption rather than understanding of tourist sites. It also searches beyond the official recognition of cultural heritage, exploring the intellectual mindsets that might have shaped these architectural works.

A first impression that may strike a reader familiar with Macau is the idea of Macau depicted as a Baroque city, somewhat in the manner of an allegory. The usual historical depiction of Macau is rather that of a Portuguese settlement in China that knew its ups and downs prior to its establishment, was sensitively negotiated though it was never too certain of its status in China and was limited by restrictions, such as the fact that foreigners were initially only allowed to construct and live in wooden houses. Such circumstances hardly suggests that early Portuguese settlers of Macau were in a position to be much concerned with contemporary Baroque aesthetics, whose visual impression is far from being minimal, subtle in stimulation or inconsequent in aesthetical pursuits.

Baroque is an aesthetic based on discourse, where rhetoric and effect play major roles. For it to be effective the persons targeted as spectators of this discourse need to be able to acknowledge the signs that the discourse articulates, or at least to be able to surrender to its stimulation in order to participate in the induction of such discourse. Should that not happen, the discourse of the Baroque fails. Baroque strategic discourse may also articulate quite intense stimulations. Should such stimulations not impress the viewer in the way it was intended, the discourse may well produce rather unpredictable appreciations, which may not even have been what was expected. Also, the discourse of the Baroque is programmatic, has an agenda to execute, and targets specific results, that is to say, the response and participation of the spectator. Should

its agenda be ideological, the response that is expected is necessarily one of acceptance.

For this reason the negotiated statutory framework of Macau in China could in some way explain why one may not encounter in the city the same Baroque aesthetical extravaganza that one finds in other Western settlements in Asia, namely in Spanish settlements in the Philippines or other Portuguese settlements in India. Moreover, present day understanding of the impression that European Baroque aesthetics might have caused in China at that time is that it could have ranged from rejection, for paradoxically conveying a sense of evil, to simply lack of interest. A representative example is the Jesuit missionary and painter Giuseppe Castiglione (1688- 1766), who was trained in Italy as a painter in the aesthetics of his time, sent to Macau by the European Catholic Church and later accepted as a renowned court imperial artist in Beijing. Yet Castiglione did not make full use of the visual extravaganza that was part of the contemporary aesthetics in which he was trained.

Therefore, the hypothesis that the architecture that has been assembled in Macau was intended to convey control and an ideology of triumphant power: what can be learned in that respect from the Baroque aesthetics, realized in the urbanisation of Macau, appears rather to indicate that some compromises were necessary during its realisation.

Another point of view strongly expressed in the book is in favour of the contemporary approach that claims that an aesthetics of visual and spatial manipulation is not exclusive of the Baroque period in art history. Also, that as much as we tend to identify the Baroque with the dynamic dialectics of Western thinking, Baroque may not be an exclusive concept of Western civilization, at least as represented in this book. In the West such aesthetical manifestations emerged rather obviously in other periods in history, namely in architecture, to suit similar mindsets, such as that of the Romantic age and of the postmodern period. It is via Postmodernity that today's generations have an opportunity to relate to the phenomena as participants rather than as mere observers. However these are manifestations that do not exist purely aesthetically and that do not just emerge from mindsets. They still have to be propelled with a programmatic discourse as vehicle or linking element.

In this respect *Walking Macao, Reading the Baroque* is bound to produce a strong impression, especially on those who were close to the examples of contemporary architecture of Macau that have been selected and depicted to convey the context of the book. This is so because the geneses of that contemporary architecture was not bound, nor had the opportunity, to embody or to serve the programmatic discourse presented in the book.

At this point one is likely to surrender to the evidence that a structure of interpretation can be a far more efficient discourse than the original text itself; in this case an urban context where its parts could appear rather loose, if not lost, without a discourses who interprets it. This way Macau could be a case study where, via interpretation, the perception of urban existence can be switched from that of an unfairly depicted late obscure colonial settlement with an extensive architectural substance of cultural relevancy, to that of an extravagant colonial realm of cultural heritage and cultural encounters, where actually only some architectural substance culturally relevant to its present day urban development survives. In such a depiction, again via interpretation and elaboration, the fact that the economy is based on the gaming industry would not appear damaging, should an appropriate discourse be found for this argument.

In *Walking Macao, Reading the Baroque*, the reader is invited to visit the city. However, in order to follow all the disparate locations of this itinerary in space and in time, as well as have access to the bibliographic references necessary for him to consider while interpreting these architectonic examples, the invitation may well have to be understood metaphorically. As a metaphor, the places selected in the book for this itinerary should really be understood by the reader as representations and the itinerary as a path of interpretation. If so understood a reader will more likely be able to realise how a metaphoric architectural assemblage may generate a particular idea of an urban structure.

Metaphorical urbanism is not of course new to history, especially during those periods when urbanism was used to serve an ideology. Good examples of urban metaphorical constructions are how the plans of Sixtus V for Rome were intended to serve Counter Reformation ideology, how the rationalistic architecture of Speer served the fantasies of Nazi Germany. A more recent example is how President Mitterrand was to celebrate the 200 years of the French Revolution by extending and complementing the

Parisian axis with a 3<sup>rd</sup> monumental arch, aligned with the two initial arches, whose axial relation was initially unexposed and unintended. The relation only exists due to the fact that the Tuileries Palace was never rebuilt after the Communards set it on fire in 1817, during the suppression of the Paris Commune. Assembling architecture via interpretation, bringing existing architecture into a context, not necessarily the original context, has served ideologies in the past and is often a way, not only for new architectural accomplishments, but also for architectural suppressions, in order to assure, reinforce or accurately complement the parts and the links of the envisaged discourse.

How metaphorical urbanism is to serve contemporary societies, especially when ideology is no longer a strong point, is a pertinent question. Probably the anthropological global quest, that the ideological mindset may condescend to the gratification mindset, is part of the equation. Whether indeed it has any correspondence in the structure of interpretation in present day urban settlements, may also be question that needs verification. Closed condos and shopping malls, as well as theme parks and cultural centres, are all urbanistic strategies that target gratification today. In some cases the transferring of the public capacity of urbanization to the private economical sector is where such specialities are better conducted and performed. In territorial planning this is even phenomena that have been identified, also metaphorically, as the Disneyfication of contemporary cities. Therefore, places more interested in attracting consumption or places more interested in conveying thematic understanding may well be part of a same urban strategy, only targeting different market segments.

In *Walking Macao, Reading the Baroque* the reader may not fully agree with all or with part of the interpretation of Macao given in the book. But he will not fail to observe how important it is for cities to have a sound structure of interpretation, namely as a guideline or framework to urbanism and urban development. He or she will also not fail to understand how interpretation can work in orientating urban settlements or how important ethics, as well as critical thinking, are in shaping an urban structure of interpretation.