



## **Everyday Landscapes and Urban DIYism in Sanzihou, Taipei<sup>i</sup>**

***Jeffrey Hou***

*University of Washington*

### **Abstract**

Sanzihou is the site of a former American military housing compound in Taipei. As a peri-urban neighborhood mixed with an iconic Cold War landscape developed during the Korean War, Sanzihou is a contested site at multiple levels. On one hand, preservationists and developers have battled over plans to redevelop or preserve the area. On the other hand, residents and students engage in a different kind of contestation as they battle over the lack of adequate housing and other public amenities. In 2007, an advocacy organization in Taipei put together a design charrette to envision the future of the area with a focus on reconciling preservation and the everyday life of the local residents. This article examines how the outcomes of the charrette overcome the limitation of the discourses of preservation and development by improvising and uncovering the possibilities of the everyday. The focus on the everyday, the article argues, provides an alternative spatial discourse and practice that addresses the needs and assets of the community and unleashes the social and spatial possibilities in the landscapes of the contemporary city.

In fast-changing cities around the world, historic preservation has been a highly contested issue. As historic neighborhoods and landmarks are razed for new development, intense battles have occurred between different

interest groups. Proponents of development argue typically on the basis of economic development, physical improvement, and the greater public good. On the other hand, preservation activists argue for protecting historic identity and cultural heritage and against the social and environmental impacts of development. In Taipei, a sprawling metropolis and the political and economic center of Taiwan, historic preservation has been the subject of constant battles between the development authority and preservation activists. Since the early 1990s, there have been numerous protests against proposed demolition of historic landmarks and redevelopment of historic neighborhoods. Many battles were lost while there were also a few significant victories. In most cases, however, while the fights were waged by educated professionals and preservation activists, the actual residents and owners seem like bystanders in events that determine the fate of their neighborhoods, homes, and personal and collective belongings. As interest groups argue over the historic or intrinsic values of the property, the debate often become detached from the everyday life of the local residents.

[2] The recent battle in preserving the “cultural landscape” of Sanzihou is one such example. While preservationists and representatives of the Taiwan Bank (that owns the property) duke it out during public meetings and encounters, life in the neighborhood goes on. In the streets of Sanzihou, the contestation follows a different pattern as residents and students (from a

nearby university) deal with congested traffic, crowded housing, and few public amenities such as public space, parks, libraries, etc., on a daily basis. Few of them were engaged in a debate that would drastically alter the landscape and life of the area. The situation begs these questions: how can preservation of historic properties reconcile with the everyday life of their surrounding inhabitants? How can the everyday experiences and possibilities inform the discourse and practice of preservation and the making of public realm in the case of Sanzihou?

[3] In 2007, the Taipei-based "Organization for Urban Re-s"(OURs) held a design charrette to address these questions.<sup>ii</sup> Entitled "Do It Yourself: Design in Yangmingsan," the charrette involved a cross-disciplinary group of students and faculty from different universities in Taiwan and abroad to examine alternatives to the conventional practice of preservation and development by discovering the possibilities of the everyday in Sanzihou.<sup>iii</sup> This article examines the development and outcomes of this experiment. Specifically, it investigates how different projects developed and implemented during the charrette address the possibilities in the everyday environment vis-à-vis the binary conflicts between preservation and development.

### **Cultural Landscape: Everyday Practice vs. Preservation**

The contemporary discourse of cultural landscape emerged in the 1960s and 1970s in a focus on vernacular landscape by theorists in landscape architecture, geography, and history. It represents a shift away from the fixation on singular buildings and architectural work toward the broader built environment. It also signals a movement from the narrow focus on the monumental structures and elitist landmarks to a more inclusive investigation of the ordinary, everyday landscapes (see Meinig; Jackson; Groth and Bressi; Alanen and Melnick). Expressing such inclusive perspective, scholars like J. B. Jackson regard all landscapes as cultural (Ingerson). Alanen and Melnick (3) also argue that cultural landscapes exist virtually everywhere where “human activities have affected the land...”. In many ways, the discourse of cultural landscape with a particular focus on ordinary environment predates the recent interest on the everyday in the field of architecture and urbanism as found in the publication of *Everyday Urbanism* (Chase, Crawford, and Kaliski) and *Architecture of the Everyday* (Harris and Berke). It even preceded Michel de Certeau’s seminal work, *The Practice of Everyday Life*.

[5] Since the 1990s, the concept of cultural landscape has undergone significant institutionalization through adoption in the World Heritage Convention and the guidelines of National Parks Service in the United States. With these official indoctrinations, however, the discourse of cultural

landscape has taken a different turn, moving away from the investigation of the everyday toward a narrower focus on preservation. As such, the openness and inclusiveness of cultural landscape as a concept and practice is often replaced with the technocratic practice of preservation planning and design. Rather than a part of the everyday life, cultural landscape is now the realm of professional practice. Selection of cultural landscape for official designations as landmarks, for example, tends to be monopolized by experts, with limited or no input from ordinary citizens. Okawa argues that because of the dominant role of experts and professionals, coupled with the lack of participation by citizens, the practice of preservation is often divorced from the movement in the society. As such one can argue that the current discourse and practice of cultural landscape has lost its connection to the everyday.

### **Sanzihou as a Contested Cultural Landscape**

Located in the northern edge of the Taipei basin, Sanzihou (meaning “behind the hill”) is a small valley set in the scenic Yangmingsan Mountain. The area was settled by Chinese immigrants during the Ching Dynasty who engaged in farming and sulfur mining for living (Lin, et al. ed. n.d.). After a long period of seclusion, the landscape of Sanzihou underwent a major transformation in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century with the discovery of a hot spring during Japan’s colonial occupation of Taiwan from 1895 to 1945. The hot

spring drew the visit of Emperor Hirohito (then Crown Prince) in 1923. The scenery of the area also made it a popular place of residence for many high ranking Nationalist Chinese officials after World War II as they took over Taiwan from the Japanese.

[7] During the Korean War in the 1950s, Sanzihou experienced another major transformation as the United States military established a housing compound on lands confiscated from local farmers (Hsia and Lin). Sanzihou's proximity to the U.S. Command Center, Embassy, and residence of key government officials, as well as its scenic landscape provided the rationale for establishing the compound there (Hsia and Lin). From 1952 to 1964, about 217 units of American-style houses were built using prescribed drawings provided by the American military (Hsia and Lin). Organized based on military ranks, the houses were mostly single detached homes with a few duplexes. With features such as Cul-de-sec and T-junction, the compound has its own school, club, sports facilities, a playground, and even a radio station. Many local residents who lived outside the compound worked as servants in the complex (with salaries higher than some local professionals). In 1980, with the end of diplomatic relation between the U.S. and Taiwan,<sup>iv</sup> the housing compounds were left behind by the departing U.S. military personnel and were taken over by the Taiwan Bank, a former subsidiary of the now defunct Provincial Government. Over time, various parcels have

been developed leaving only about 115 units intact currently, many of which were rented to private individuals by the Bank as residences. Today, the Sanzihou site is the largest remaining U.S. military housing complex in Taiwan, a stark reminder of the Cold War (see figure 1).



**Figure 1**

Located in Sanzihou, the largest remaining U.S. military housing quarters in Taiwan is also a green oasis in the concrete jungle of Taipei.

[8] The preservation dispute concerning the U.S. military compound in Sanzihou began in 2005-2006 as Taiwan Bank, now a privatized entity,

planned to sell the property, estimated to be worth over several billions of Taiwan Dollars. The preservationists (some are renters in the bank-owned properties) argue that the compound is an important historic and cultural landmark, one of the few reminders of Taiwan's historic role during the Cold War. The Western-style, modern housing was also highly influential on the architectural development in the nation. Furthermore, they argue that redevelopment through the proposed up-zone would take away the precious green space, increase burden on the existing infrastructure (water supply, sewage, and waste collection), and worsen the already congested traffic condition in the mountainous area. Located at the edge of the Yanmingsan National Park, Sanzihou also functions as a buffer between the park and the dense urban areas. It is rich with plants and wildlife not found in typical urban settings. Specifically, 40 of the 60 protected trees in the area are located in the U.S. Military Housing Compound. Many of them are native species (Lin, et al. ed. n.d.).

[9] To counter the claims of the preservationists, the Bank insists that it is simply exercising the rights of a private property owner to sell and develop the land. However, the preservationists, including several planning scholars, challenge the legality of the Bank's land ownership. They argue that the land should be considered as public since it was once the Provincial Government's land holdings and was forcefully appropriated from the local farmers in the



first place. They further argue that the site should be formally designated as a protected cultural landscape, which would preempt attempts to redevelop the site. On a different front, however, the preservation of the Cold War landscape that memorializes foreign occupation also raises the eyebrows of some post-colonial theorists who question the appropriateness of preserving the military housing compound as the nation's or city's heritage.

### **Everyday Landscapes in Sanzihou**

Contrary to the high-level preservation debate, the everyday life in Sanzihou reflects a different kind of contestation. Rather than the former military housing, the area is better known in Taipei as home to the private Chinese Culture University, the fourth largest university in the nation with a student population of 27,000. Besides the university, there are also a private college, a municipal middle school, and a European school in the nearby area. Even without the proposed redevelopment, the roads are already congested with commuting students, faculty, and other local residents, as well as tourists and visitors heading to the National Park further up the mountain. Sidewalks in the retail core of the area are practically non-existent as they are inundated with parked motorbikes and vending carts spilled over from the stores. With thousands of motorbikes roaming in the steep mountain roads, there is a high rate of accidents. Once redeveloped, the area will receive about 10,000 new residents who will compete with the

thousands of current students and residents commuting to schools and work in the already congested roads.



**Figure 2**

The narrow alleys of the local neighborhood stand in contrast to the open space of the military housing quarters.

[11] Because of the limited number of dormitories, the neighborhood is packed with students living in the crowded quarters of subdivided rental apartments. With no parks and community facilities nearby other than a small community center, the local residents turned doorsteps and corners of narrow alleyways into social gathering spaces (see figure 2). Ironically, while the roads and apartment buildings are congested, there is an abundance of

open land (though not public) resulting from the suburban layout of the former military housing compound. As there are no fences surrounding many of the properties, local residents often take strolls in the former military housing compounds with their wide streets and matured trees and greenery. Kids in the neighborhood also play in the remaining playground located in the compound. Besides being used as typical private residences, there are also some unusual tenants, including a facility for the mentally disabled that also functions as a café and a vocational training center. With its own gardens and green house, the facility takes advantage of the setting of the compound and demonstrates an alternative reuse of the space for social and community purposes.

[12] Far from a protected fortress or a gated community (though the homes of some important residents are still heavily guarded), the former military housing compound is now an important part of the everyday landscape in Sanzihou. The ways they are being used and appropriated by the local residents and social organizations indicate greater possibilities for the future preservation and transformation of the site. These possibilities challenge both the mainstream discourse and practice of preservation that tend to focus on singular meaning and historic narrative. They also challenge the model of urban redevelopment based solely on commercial values and financial returns.

**DIYism Charrette: "The Americans are back!"**

The OURs-organized DIYism charrette in summer 2007 was an attempt to reexamine the practice and possibilities of preserving the former military housing compound from the perspectives of the everyday. OURs is a planning advocacy organization consisting of mostly professionals, faculty, and students in planning, architecture, and landscape architecture in Taiwan. The organization emerged from the protest movement against the government's inadequate housing policy in the early 1990s. Since then, it has also engaged in several important battles to preserve important but neglected historic properties in Taipei. Almost every summer, OURs organizes a charrette or workshop that involved multidisciplinary teams of university students to examine an ongoing planning and design issue. In 2006, OURs collaborated with the Sanzihou History and Culture Society on a charrette to propose development alternatives for the former military housing compound. The 2007 charrette was a follow-up to the previous charrette. But rather than the master-planning approach of the previous charrette, the focus in 2007 shifted toward the experiences and perspectives of the everyday life and environment in the area in an attempt to broaden the discursive bases for preserving the compound and to create opportunities for community engagement.

[14] The 2007 charrette brought together 45 university students and ten faculty members to form seven multidisciplinary teams that focused on different issues and sites in Sanzihou. The local university students were joined by a group of American students from the University of Washington in Seattle who were participating in a study abroad program in Taipei and Tokyo. The mixture of students was envisioned by the organizers to bring the necessary cross-cultural and international perspectives to interpreting the multiple meanings of the former military housing compound and envision its future transformation. Besides enriching the dialogue, the participation of the American students also helped raise the awareness of the current issues and past history of Sanzihou to a citywide audience.

[15] The charrette lasted five days, with students living in a nearby camping facility, and coming to work in the local community center everyday during those five days. The activities included site visits, guided tours, and a panel discussion with the participation of the preservation activists, a Bank representative, residents, and students from the Chinese Culture University. Other activities included team working sessions, joint discussion and presentations, site installations, and social events (see figure 3). During those five days, students and faculty learned about the natural and cultural history of the area, the ecosystems in the immediate neighborhood and the larger region, and the contestation between forces of preservation and

development. Depending on their respective focus, the teams also conducted interviews and observations to further investigate specific issues facing Sanzihou.



**Figure 3**

Professor Chao-Ching Yu worked with students from Chung Yuan University and University of Washington.

[16] Titled "Do It Yourself, Design in Yangmingsan," the student/faculty teams were asked to come up with creative adaptation of the existing structures and spaces in the former military housing compound for new uses, activities, and interpretations. The use of "DIYism" as a theme of the

charrette is itself a critique of the predominant practice of design and planning that focus on a master planning approach. By “doing it yourself,” the charrette focused on bottom-up adaptation of the fabric of the housing compound that would address the agenda of specific social groups in Sanzihou, rather the dominant discourses of either preservation or redevelopment. Implicit in the theme of DIYism is also a disguised attempt to take over or squat in the Bank-controlled properties at least for the duration of the charrette to raise public awareness of the issue.

### **Projects: Improvising and Uncovering**

At the end of the five-day charrette, the different student projects were showcased through a tour of the on-site installations or performances. These temporary installations and performances represented different ways through which the housing compound and its associated spatial fabric could be appropriated, improvised, and reinterpreted. They also reflected the action-oriented approach of the charrette and theme of DIYism.

[18] In the project led by the author, the students focused on the transformation of a narrow alleyway between a row of residences and an abandoned helicopter port used during the active days of the housing compound. This unassuming alleyway was the site of a field ecology tour organized during the design charrette. In a walk through the alleyway, the

students were introduced to a rich array of plant species that exist in unexpected corners of the alleyway, from walls to telephone poles, and on top and behind the fences. For the students, the tour transformed an otherwise ordinary alleyway into a museum of plants and ecology. This revelation led the students to the concept of an outdoor gallery for residents and visitor to (re)discover the richness of the everyday environment in Sanzihou. In response to the concern of some residents about the lack of cultural facilities in the area, the outdoor gallery would serve as a cultural amenity that highlights the history and ecology of the site. Named **Gallery 55** (based on the alley number), the redesigned alley featured 16 “artworks,” ranging from a singular guava tree to an “ants’ apartment” and a “nature’s music station” equipped with headphones with empty earpieces (see figure 4). One installation featured a “book stop” for residents to exchange books in lieu of a public library. During the final presentation of the charrette, cards with information and a map of the gallery were distributed to local restaurants and stores, inviting customers, storeowners, and residents to visit the site (see figure 5).





**Figure 4**  
The “Nature’s Radio Station” Installation in Alley (Gallery) 55.



**Figure 5**  
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## Invitation to Gallery 55

[19] The project led by Mali Wu and Annie Chu examines the intersection of personal memories and the collective history of Sanzihou by focusing on an antique store owned by a local resident. The building was scheduled to be demolished a month after the charrette, which provided students with an opportunity to transform its interior space into a “laboratory.” The “experiment” began with a “**garage sale**” (of the remaining antiques inside the store), an easily recognized icon of American culture. The event opened the store to a broader audience including other local residents (the store was previously accessible only by appointment) and blurred the boundaries between public realm and private space (the store was also the residence of the owner). During the five-day charrette, the students interviewed the storeowner and her friends. Each day, their stories were written or drawn on the interior walls, turning individual rooms into chambers of personal memories, a reflection of the deeper history of the American military presence and its impact on the lives of local residents (see figure 6). As visitors experienced the space, they interacted not only with the private space of individuals but also with the collective and more inclusive history of the place.



**Figure 6**

Students transformed the local antique store into chambers of memories.

[20] In a project titled **“We’ all live together,”** Min Jay Kang led a group of students to examine the reprogramming of the American-style dwellings as co-op housing for different social groups. Specifically, it engaged a reimagining of “new families” in the contemporary Taiwanese society. As a demonstration, the group came up with nine sample cooperative homes for different types of users. They are “Awestruck!” (nature lovers), “In Hot Water” (hot springs men), “Sweet Muscle” (craftspeople), “On the Edge” (LGBTQ Alliance), “Love-u-Lots” (Single Parents), “Spirited Women and Creative Space,” “New Horizons” (Teachers), “Pen and Ink” (Writers), and “Bountiful Harvest” (Vegetarians). For their final presentation, the students



produced a set of couplets for each type of homes. In front of vacant dwellings in the compound, they recited the couplets and mounted them over the entrances of the dwellings. When the nearby dwellings were occupied, they also presented them as presents to the neighbors (see figure 7). By focusing on the future residents, the project involved not only a reimagining of space, but also a reimagining of social relationships, identities, and subjectivity.



**Figure 7**

An Entrance to a vacant dwelling was decorated with Chinese couplets that suggested rehabilitation by an alternative community.



**Figure 8**

A paved courtyard was transformed into a permacultural garden.

[21] While most other groups contemplated and debated over the complex issues of the site, one group led by Chao-Ching Yu and Yung-Ti Tai was quietly and not-so-quietly tearing up the concrete pavement in an abandoned courtyard inside the housing compound—in a most direct expression of DIYism. Using shovels and sledgehammers, the student and faculty team created a large temporary garden by uncovering the soils beneath the pavement and by reusing the concrete debris for making paths and gathering spaces. The demolition brought nearby residents to watch and discuss the future of the site. The garden, however, was more symbolic than real since it was not possible to grow plants during the short five-day charrette. Instead of real plants, photographs of fruits and vegetables were placed in the tilled land, signifying both the opportunity and reality of the present site (see figure 8). The project was a demonstration of a more ambitious scheme to turn the large tracts of open lawn and abandoned facilities into productive, cultivated land. In place of the old military housing compound, a new self-sustained community would emerge in Sanzihou under this proposal.

### **Reflections: Possibilities of the Everyday**

Months after the charrette, the preservationists declared victory as the site was officially designated by the City as a protected cultural landscape. The battle was won not because of the outcomes of the charrette but instead

through maneuvers inside the City's preservation commission. As expected, while the important battle was won, the dwellings continued to sit there, and life and everyday problems seem unchanged in the area. Although the site has become a protected part of the city's historic landmarks, it remains isolated from the rest of the city. Meanwhile, the contestations of the everyday life continue for the local residents as they faced traffic congestions and lack of public amenities. The outcome, although a much-welcomed change to the prevalent pattern of redevelopment, suggests an important limitation of the current preservation planning practice and the narrow interpretation of the concept of cultural landscape it encourages.

[23] Sanzihou is an important asset to the City of Taipei. However, its importance derives not only from its historic value, but also from its unique fabric and location within a dense peri-urban neighborhood. The approach and results of the DIY charrette suggest alternatives to the conundrum of preservation and development if one were to explore creative solutions based on an understanding of the everyday needs and assets of the community and the engagement of its citizens. The charrette projects suggest programmatic possibilities by improvising what already existed in the area. They uncover old memories as well as new opportunities. Rather than simply displacing or preserving what exists on site, the projects bridge the old and the new by injecting new life and interpretations to the complex

layers of personal and collective memories. While there are limitations to the charrette in terms of its short-term nature and limited engagement, the results articulate a significant spatial discourse with important ramifications for the future uses of the site. In the case of Sanzihou, the possibilities of everyday fill the void left by dominant discourses of preservation and development. It infuses the discussion concerning the future of the site with the nuances and richness of the current neighborhood.

[24] What if the lawns and large tract of “private lands” can be turned into productive plots and gardens to create a more environmentally sustainable community? What if a “gallery” could be created by local residents to celebrate the ecological diversity and everyday artistic richness inside the neighborhood? What if more of the personal stories could be captured that reflect the collective and multilayered memories of the site? What if the dwellings could be used for a wider variety of programs and activities that reflect the diversity of the city? The uncovering of the everyday in Sanzihou is a simultaneous uncovering of an alternative spatial discourse and practice in transforming the landscapes of the contemporary city.

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<sup>i</sup> DIY (Do It Yourself) is obviously a term used often in home improvement and craft making. But it has also been used in other contexts such as neighborhood self-help (Richardson 2008).

<sup>ii</sup> More information about the charrette can be found at --  
<http://blog.yam.com/user/szh2007.html>

<sup>iii</sup> The author participated in the organizing of the charrette and brought a group of fifteen graduate and undergraduate students from the University of Washington to take part in the

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charrette as a part of a summer Exploration Seminar program –  
<http://courses.washington.edu/asiacity/2007/>.

<sup>iv</sup> The United States switched its formal diplomatic relation from Taiwan to China in 1980.

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