

An Afternoon Conversation with Prof. Dietrich Neumann— Of Skyscrapers, bamboo, sculptures and taxi stands



Professor Dietrich Neumann is a professor at Brown University, in Providence, Rhode Island in the United States, teaching history of Modern Architecture. He was Director of Brown's Urban Studies for six years, and then the Director of the John Nicholas Brown Center for Public Humanities and Cultural Heritage.

He was a Visiting Professor with us for the MA in Cultural Management program between January and April 2023. While here, he taught a seminar course, 'Public Art/Public Humanities', as well as a second course, titled 'City Imaginaries and Cinema Poetics'.

Perhaps we could start off this interview with you sharing a bit about yourself. How did you end up in architecture, and how were you invited to Hong Kong as a visiting professor?

I was born in Germany and since childhood, I've always wanted to be an architect, I think, as I played with Lego when I was small and built tall skyscrapers. I went to an architecture school in Germany and London, and ended up teaching and getting a PhD in architectural history. Shortly after by sheer coincidence, I got an offer to go to Brown University in the United States. I loved it there, and have been there now for over thirty years. I've mostly taught modern and contemporary architecture and architecture history, and a little bit of studio in recent years.

In the last few years, I was director of Urban Studies for six years. Then I became director of a program that Americans call Public Humanities—a term very hard to translate into other languages, and not even very precise in English. It's about the idea of bringing knowledge and the humanities, art, music or architecture to the public. This is to ensure the university is not closed in but reaches out, makes things we do understandable to the

public, and at the same time, learns from the public.

My predecessors at the Public Humanities program, Professors Susan Smulyan and Steve Lubar, have had a long-standing relationship with CUHK Cultural Management's Directors, Benny Lim and his predecessor, Oscar Ho. When Benny became director, he called me,

we chatted and got along perfectly. He invited me to come here for a semester to teach. I've always loved skyscrapers as they've always played a big role in my classes, and skyscrapers in Hong Kong were often featured as well, although I've never been here then. So I said yes, that sounds very exciting!

Let's talk about your fascination for skyscrapers. How did that come about?

I'm not quite sure where that fascination came from. I actually have a little fear of heights myself if I don't have a railing. I've always been fascinated and many years ago, I wrote a children's book, *Joe and the Skyscraper*. It was great fun, based on the real story of this little boy who worked on the building side of the Empire State Building in New York—then the tallest tower in the world—bringing water to the workers.

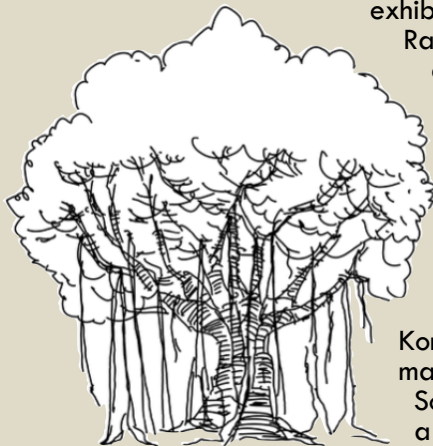


My PhD thesis, which was turned into a book, was on skyscrapers in Germany—an odd topic because Germany in the 1920s didn't build many skyscrapers, but they had big dreams. They're all on paper—hundreds, maybe even thousands of them, as every city had architects

designing huge skyscrapers. Germany had initiated and lost the first world war and now wanted to signal a new beginning, new prosperity, even independence from the US—as all these skyscrapers tried to look different from the American ones. Instead the Nazis came, and the Second World War happened with horrible consequences around the world. But in between, during the 1920s, there was this surge of enthusiasm for new buildings and exciting constructions.

That led to another book, *Film Architecture: Set Designs from Metropolis to Blade Runner*, also kind of dealing with skyscrapers to a certain degree, as I realised many movies—from the old German film, *Metropolis*, all the way up to *Blade Runner*—gave skyscrapers a big role. I just recently edited a booklet for an

exhibition on a man called Raymond Hood—an architect in New York in the 1930s who designed a number of wonderful skyscrapers.



I had talked about the HSBC bank downtown (in Hong Kong) by Norman Foster many times in my classes.

So when I had to open a bank account, that was of course the first

place I went, rode up the escalator into that breathtaking atrium and opened my bank account. It was funny—I was so eager and went over the Chinese New Year period and apparently everything closes, which I hadn't expected. But I saw gatherings of these very joyful groups of mostly women—maybe from the Philippines—who sat and ate together, which was such a great contrast to this high-tech building. So that gave me a whole new perspective and a powerful impression of Hong Kong, skyscrapers and life in this amazing city.

And my wife found us a great apartment, where we live in one of these slender pencil buildings in Sai Ying Pun. We have a great view of all the skyscrapers in Hong Kong, so I'm really happy when I look out from our terrace.

I think what works really well in Hong Kong is the density that the skyscrapers create, so that you have enough people living in one area. Since they need to come downstairs and eat, they sustain a lot of little restaurants and little shops. So the street life is really vibrant in many areas. It hardly works in the United States, where everything is so spread out and it's very hard for a restaurant to survive. People have big kitchens and big houses, and they either cook at home or get their food delivered.

Oscar (Ho) and I had a nice conversation over lunch, where he mentioned it was interesting to study how people who live in very small apartments have had to move some of their personal life into the public sphere. So you see people exercising in the park, and my wife goes every morning to join a Tai Chi group in the park down the street. So it's this shift between private and public space that is different from many other cities, where some of the privacy happens in the public realm,

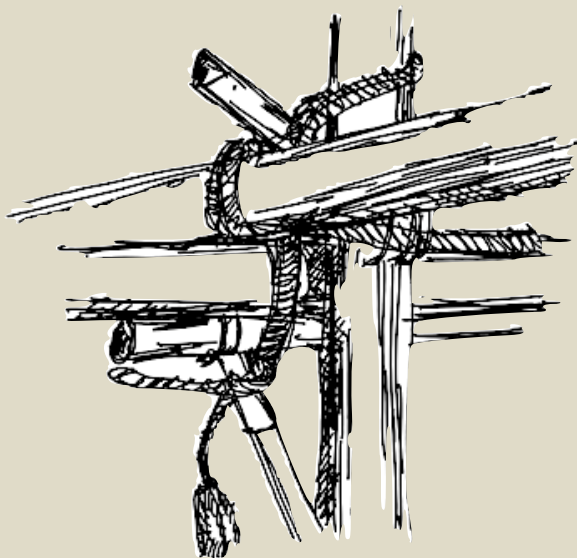
like the drying of your laundry, visible to everyone. So that's really interesting and worth studying more.

At the same time, Hong Kong has great appreciation for nature, with islands and trails everywhere.

Speaking of which, nature is also two-faced: on the one hand, a sight to behold, and on the other, a possible and potential destructive force. In terms of architecture, what are some relations to, and considerations of nature, and how do they pan out?

One of my great fascinations, which has to do with the climate, is the banyan tree—a wonderful specimen which only grows in this tropical climate and it is a miracle of architecture. Their air roots pick up nutrients and humidity. When they reach the ground, they get increasingly stronger to support the branches. It's almost a metaphor for good architecture, where it keeps growing and can sustain on its own.

Another thing I love in Hong Kong, is that all the scaffolding is still bamboo, which is wonderful as it is a sustainable material that grows very quickly. There's a



lot of research on bamboo as a real building material, which, just like laminated wood, has less impact on the environment compared to steel and concrete. If the scaffolding is all steel, which would be in the United States, it is so much heavier, much more expensive to produce, with more carbon footprint wasted in the production of those scaffolding.

One of the big topics today is the realisation that architecture and sustaining, building,

cooling and heating cities use up about over 50% of the carbon footprint. This impact of the environment obviously leads to climate change. So architecture and urban issues are, and should be at the centre of all the forward-thinking ideas on how we can sustain the planet, which has become more urgent in recent years. I think the issue of sustainability should be central in architectural schools, although I don't know enough about whether it is in Hong Kong. In the United States, it isn't given enough of a central role, as there is still great concern for formal solutions and formalism in general. Of course,

industries that produce steel and concrete, which have very strong lobbyists, will try and hold on to their turf and keep wood and bamboo at bay.

Hearing you talk about climate change, sustainability, and cities being cooled or heated up and taking up so much carbon footprint, to what extent are climate differences across geographic regions central to architectural designs in the history of architecture up till today?

In a way, a great tragedy of the 20th century is the globalisation of an approach to architecture, namely a modern architecture with mass production that is fast, cheap, simple and free of ornaments. Applied everywhere, cities and everything else built after the 1970s tend to look alike. For example, in informal settlements, which used to be called slums, concrete blocks became ubiquitous, which is not a great material even if it's cheap and quick to produce. It has bad temperature coefficients, which means it's cold in winter, and warm in the summer, while of course we want the opposite—namely bricks which are warm in winter and cool in summer to cool the house. But concrete blocks were applied nevertheless. They were cheap and considered modern, and suddenly people who lived in brick or rammed earth houses were looked down upon as being poor.

Students from former colonies, let's say Jamaica in the Caribbean—a former British colony which became independent in 1961—go to architecture schools in the United States and Canada, then come back and build modern architecture in Jamaica. This is not good for the climate, which is similar to Hong Kong, looks terrible and destroys the aesthetics and the regional customs. So it's a bit of a tragedy that this modernist stance has engulfed the globe, partially because it was cheaper, and because people thought this was the new modern thing to do, or that it looked better if they had some modern applications. It also means that a lot of local vernacular and regional knowledge and architecture that respected and responded to the climate was replaced and lost.

Last year, the architect who won the Pritzker Prize—we call it the Nobel Prize in architecture—was from Burkina Faso in Africa. He builds with bricks and tries to revive the old traditions. So this is a way to make a difference—do good architecture with the local craftsmen, traditions and materials responding to the climate. Then it will have an impact.

What and where could be hopeful interventions or recuperations in this case? And to what extent do you think it could be in the arena of art?

It could certainly be in the arena of art, as it's really fascinating to see growing recognition of regionalism and growing crafts, and responses to the climate crisis. In our field of public humanities and public art, public humanities is, in a way, a mediator between the arts and the public, so it can create or point out meaning, and

these certainly overlap with Cultural Management to make public art more visible.

I know from experience that when we walk around a city and maybe see a sculpture or art pieces in the urban landscape, we don't pay attention or really look at it but walk past it as it doesn't really mean anything. A German writer from the 18th century whom I greatly admire, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, said 'We only see what we know', and there is some truth to it. Once you know something about it, you can either appreciate it or, like in the case of England and the United States where a sculpture had been standing in some square for a century and people had no idea who he was, until someone looked it up, and realised he was a slave holder. People then got together and decided not wanting his sculpture in the square anymore. That was the starting point for a meaningful discussion.

Even with the sculptor, Ju Ming's passing, I think we'll look at his sculpture in the centre of this (CUHK) campus with new eyes and reflect on his career and role. In general, I'm always in favour of contextualising, talking and creating meaning that way. That's where our little guidebook comes in as well, to tell stories about these works, and make them visible.



Let's delve into this guidebook that you mentioned—a book project with your Cultural Management seminar class. Could you share with us how it started and what is it about?

It started very early on, as I thought it would be nice for a seminar in Cultural Management to have a class project. Initially I thought maybe we could do something in the city of Hong Kong. Benny then took me on a little tour of the campus, and I realised there were art pieces on the campus at different colleges no one seemed to know much about. I spoke with Benny and he said that was actually not a bad idea. I then walked around with Haoqian, our TA, started taking photos and decided to make this a class project.

I think it's also an interesting experience for students in Cultural Management to see the steps involved in putting a guidebook together. We divided the campus map into quadrants and students went on scouting expeditions to find all the artwork, and I showed how editing is very much part of these projects. The students asked for a Chinese version, and so the English and Chinese versions are in one volume, with Haoqian and the students working on translation. We invited the designer from Malaysia to join us on Zoom during class, and step by step it came together as students saw what kinds of

thoughts and decisions had to be made in terms of format.

We had a lot of discussions about materiality and how much you can learn from engaging with a public sculpture, as you feel the temperature and roughness of its surface. When you gently knock on it, you can tell if it is hollow or solid. It is important to understand its three-dimensionality by seeing it from all sides. The students came up with the idea of making videos of sculptures and so we ended up with QR codes in the book, which lead straight to those films. A very exciting new way of looking at art.

What were some aspects of this project that surprised you or gave you added insights?

I think for me it was the versatility of the sculptors who can do many different things. There's also still an enormous emphasis on craft here, and really good training of skills with no shortcuts. And these sculptors really know what they're doing.

Wu Weishan is a very famous, brilliant sculptor from Nanjing, who is very good at depicting personalities, making them out of clay and then casting them in bronze. We visited Yo Sing's studio in Kennedy Town and saw that he does calligraphy, pottery, painting, carving, wood and stucco. Tat Shing Chu is also amazing. He can do both very precise and good representations of people, such as the sculpture of Sun Yat Sen at Sai Ying Pun's Sun Yat Sen Memorial Park. He also does these incredible sculptures that would turn a Chinese character, written in one continuous stroke, into a sculpture, as in the character for 'home,' the motto of S.H. Ho College.

Of course I knew none of these artists before, but now I do, and I'm very grateful. The students did amazing research as they interviewed people and searched the archives, and that was great fun.

Having experienced a semester of teaching and interacting with students here in CUHK, and thinking about your teaching and student interactions in Brown, what were some differences you encountered, and what were some memories of teaching in CUHK that fascinated you?



What is fascinating is that students here work really hard. They do their homework and come prepared to class. I explained to my students that I realised a cultural difference between students here and the United States. In the United States, I don't walk up to a student who hasn't raised his hand, and ask, 'so what do you know about the reading?'. If they don't raise their hand, it means they probably don't know the answer, and I would not want to put them on the spot and embarrass them in front of their friends. So I wait until someone

raises their hand, which means they know the answer, and then I hear what they have to say.



CUHK, students all know the answers and offer very thoughtful ideas, but don't necessarily raise their hand, and want me to walk up to them. Raising your hand might be considered a little immodest, as if you want to stand out too much. I've learned that now, and it's a very interesting and delightful cultural difference.

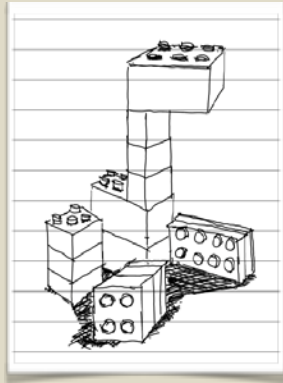
I really love the general friendliness and student engagements and little encounters outside the classrooms. I've learned about Hong Kong cinema from the students, through their favourite films and recommendations; last week I went to a movie screening where one student was involved in inviting the screenwriter. Students also recommended which museums to go to, such as the Hong Kong Museum of Art and the Oil Street Art Center. Together, we went to the Cattle Depot Artist Village and the artist, Frog King, invited our whole group of 30 students into his studio. He was a very lively storyteller, talked about undermining the art market, and went on to give every student a work of art by him to take home for free. And his art is surely valuable. That was a great encounter which was fantastic and made my day.

Besides skyscrapers, what other fascinations have you now acquired in Hong Kong during your stay here?

I have developed a fascination with Taxi signs. Behind our house on the hillside are these apartment buildings and some of these taxi signs on the street. If someone needs a taxi, the doorman presses a button, and this little sign on the apartment building starts blinking, so some random taxi driver will come by and stop. I'm sure it's slowly dying out since everyone orders taxis with Uber and Grab, but these signs are still there. I realised no one had the idea of standardising them, so every sign is different. There is a most incredible variety of taxi signs, and it has turned into a random little hobby of mine to collect images of them.

Obviously food and restaurants. I went out and tried all kinds of restaurants on my own, and when I was talking to my wife on Zoom before she joined me in Hong Kong, she teased me on how I had told her I just had the best meal of my life five times! I love telling that story.

I also love going to little nondescript places and being surprised at what they have going on. At Sai Ying Pun, we have hundreds of these dried fish and dried seafood stores, and it's fascinating that what we consider in the United States as specialty stores still survive here. There's a real landscape that varies from area to area, and yet similar stores cluster together. It's just so fascinating to me.



As for what's next for me, Brown has given me a year off. My wife and I love Italy and the city of Naples. It reminds me a little bit of Hong Kong, where in the South it also has a very mountainous cityscape with a lot of buildings overlooking the waterfront and the ocean. There is a similar sense of authenticity. I want to write a book on Naples during the year off, which is nice. And then of course, to work on that lecture course on comparative global cities!

This interview has been conducted and edited for length and clarity by Chieng Wei Shiang, PhD graduate from the Division of Cultural Studies in March 2023.

After being here in Hong Kong, and experiencing facets of its urban life—from teaching to seeing different architectural forms and art crafts, and its street life—what do you think are some possible or perceived gaps, in relation to knowledges and experiences of current urban studies, architecture or the arts for you?

That is such a good question! One of the historical facts that has always interested me is the application of urban technologies around the world. Let's say, for example, when were gaslights, or water-towers or electric streetcars introduced in different places, and how did cities learn from each other when they adopted a new technology?

In the field of public art, I am interested in the recent large-scale mural movement, where a number of, usually little known, artists receive commissions around the world. The side of a building in Cape Town might show a painting by the same artist who made a large mural in my hometown, Providence in the US. Murals fade over time, and so this is an art that is bound to vanish, it can't be sold and thus it has no presence in the art market, which is, of course, the reason why we haven't heard much about the artists.

As a concluding segment, what are some thoughts and experiences you've had from here which you hope to integrate back in Brown? And what awaits you and your wife after this teaching semester in CUHK?

I'll definitely want to do a big lecture course based on comparative cities studies, where Hong Kong will play a major role in what I've learnt here. We'll look at maybe 20 global cities and compare what they do well, what works and doesn't. For example, the comparison between Manhattan and Hong Kong leaves Manhattan looking not very good, from public safety to transportation, to the existence of clean public restrooms everywhere. The mayors of all big American cities should be flown here and not be allowed to leave for three months until they have really understood how this works. It would be great!

I've watched everything with great fascination and I love this place. When people asked me, what's your favourite city?, I would always say Paris without hesitation. Now it's Hong Kong. Much better than Paris.