

**URBAN ACUPUNCTURE**

**Marco Casagrande**

**Taiwan is on the threshold of an urban ecological awakening. This is the time to decide which way the Taiwanese cities will go. Much of the heavy industry have already moved to the surrounding countries and the citizens are looking forward to the clean-up and environmental rehabilitation of the post-industrial cities. But which way will this go: will Taiwan continue copying the artificial Western urban face-lifts or will it be the Japanese – Singapore–style eco-fascism? Or is Taiwan able to look deep into the mirror and see, realize and use its own original Taiwanese – Chinese hidden social values and energies and develop a new compost like organic way of environmentally sustainable urban living?**

I came the first time to Taipei in 2002 invited by architect Chi Ti-Nan to participate the Urban Flashes – symposium. I was very much touched by the city - mainly by the street level humanistic energies but Taipei left me also wondering why the soft core of the humanistic city did not meet with the official one. It was almost like analyzing two different cities when reading the official data and maps about Taipei and to walk the streets.

I came back the year after with the invitation of the Taipei City Government this time to spend some time studying the human / organic layer of the city and how to react to it by means of urban planning. This is the time, in October 2003, when I first entered the Treasure Hill –settlement near Gonguang.

I was shocked by Treasure Hill. It was an urban farming community enclave inside the modern city powered by grandmothers. By the time Treasure Hill was dying. The official city had given to this illegal settlement a death penalty and the bulldozing was already on its way. The farms were turned into lawns and the farmers were moved into apartment houses. Everywhere in the air was the smell of a slow death. But the energy had not left the place. It was everywhere: in the ruins of the bulldozed houses, in the furniture, altars and photo albums of abandoned houses and in the anarchy of the illegal small gardens by the river. The remaining inhabitants were scared.

I felt the human energy in Treasure Hill very strong but also that it was now directed towards death, destruction. I needed to make a plan how to tune this same energy towards construction, like turning over the compost that has been the smelly part of the farm just to become the most fertile top soil. I was careful to manipulate these hidden energy flows and the small elements that I introduced to Treasure Hill can be compared to the needles in acupuncture. I call this urban acupuncture.

**An Urban Poem**

I became the cleaner man in Treasure Hill. There was no garbage bins and the small snaking allies were full of filth. The people were hiding behind their windows but I saw that they were old. In the foot of the hill some three stories of houses had been demolished, bulldozed away and instead of the houses there was green grass. A lawn instead of a settlement because officially now this was a park zone. For nature lawn is the same as concentration camp. It is nothing. It produces a shameful amount of oxygen and is merely the roof of a worm. And these people had been living there for some 50 years and these people were gardeners, I saw the fragments everywhere – village people, growing their own food. City had stepped in and the village people had to go. Same old story.

So I became the cleaner man. The first day the people were hiding and I started to clean and transport trash from their streets down of the hill to be picked up. The next day the same. On the third day there were already some buckets waiting for me and on the fourth day the people were cleaning themselves too. Together with me was also an increasing amount of architecture students from Tamkang University and National Taiwan University. Soon the little settlement of Treasure Hill was cleaned from the garbage and I started to build up stairs to connect the remained stairways of the torn down houses. By that time Treasure Hill was a dead end and I needed to create a loop for circular movement.

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In the end of 3 weeks I had 200 students working with me and architect Shieih Yin-Jun had come down from the mountains too. With Shieih every morning we met and agreed who builds where. I don't know what language we spoke. In the end the steps were built and even a small parade took place. Treasure Hill could stay and the bulldozing was stopped. In the place of the lawn where once the houses had stood was now a vegetable garden, food and the inhabitants were eager to cultivate the land. City learned to appreciate this small sustainable settlement – a small urban poem. It helped that the poet Liao was in the charge of the Department of the Cultural Affairs.

Treasure Hill was important for me maybe because I felt that the place was so real and the city around it was so fictive. So many external powers in the city dominating the humanistic energy and in Treasure Hill none. Now after a couple of years I am happy to see that Treasure Hill still survives. I survived the heat and the construction process partly due Missis Chen, the matriarch of the settlement, who gave me Chinese medicines and feed me fish and a lot of beer. The gardening is going well of course, since these people know what to do if given a chance. There is still a lot of lawn, a useless layer of artificial nature which should be a garden too. It is good that the city is injecting new energy to the place by some artists working there but I also felt the danger of the real settlement becoming a background for art pieces. Now when I go there most of the junk laying around the mango trees and water streams are from art works – light stands, posters, pieces or worthless installations etc. If art becomes the junk of Treasure Hill, what is that? People don't have to exploit Treasure Hill or use it for anything, people should just appreciate it. What comes to art or action in a place like Treasure Hill – build another one. Build a new Treasure Hill, the Ultra Village in the hearts of Taipei.

I also feel that in Treasure Hill surfaces many of the future possibilities of environmentally sustainable urban living. Treasure Hill is like the attic of a house that contains objects of the times once lived, the good old times as the grandmother says. Narrative objects, objects with memories. Attic is the most subconscious space of a house and attic is the memory of a house. As I feel it, Treasure Hill is the attic of Taipei. The memory and the link between the modern man and nature – human nature as part of nature.

### **Forget the Forgetting**

The grandmothers of Treasure Hill are showing the way to Taipei. When the old farming based values of Treasure Hill and those of the surrounding modern city will meet a new kind of ecological urbanism might be born. I don't mean with this taking steps back technologically but on the contrary suggest to reinforce the existing urban farming qualities of the Treasure Hill with state of the art high environmental technology solutions and so view the Treasure Hill settlement as a living laboratory of sustainable urbanism. The new technologies and solutions must respect the way of life of the Treasure Hill veterans – the active solar panels and mechanical biological treatment units of organic waste must make room for the grandmothers.

The Treasure Hill settlement is build originally as an anti aircraft position on terraced on a mountain and facing straight to south. These are ideal conditions for effective use of solar energy.

The banks of the near by Xindian River are used as platforms for highway bridges leaving the ground level open. The river also acts as a wind corridor all the way from the river mouth in Danshui. The banks of the Xindian and later Danshui Rivers are suitable for urban wind energy farms.

Under the highway bridge besides Treasure Hill can easily be positioned hermetically closed in-vessel MBT (Mechanical Biological Treatment) –units to ferment organic urban waste including digested sludge. The units are using anaerobic bacteria and do not smell. The outcome of the MBT is clean water, top soil and bio gas later on to be conditioned into electricity.

By these means the Treasure Hill community can be completely sustainable what comes to its electricity use and waste treatment. Besides this it will gain fertile top soil for its farms. Also other environmental technology solutions should be tested, such as biological gray water filtering and step by step the big clean-up of the Danshui River.

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Taipei City Government should see the possibilities in Treasure Hill and react on them. The grandmothers and urban farming must stay but new environmental technologies must also be tested in a way that later on can be multiplied in Taipei and in the rest of the Taiwanese cities. The solutions must be site specific but the suitable environmental technology solutions are already existing. It is only a question of will to combine these two.

Finland has been reviewed several years in a row by the World Economic Forum as the leading country in the environmental technology solutions of the world and could be a good partner as the know-how provider.

Asia has an urban culture of thousands of years old including ancient environmentally sustainable megacities. The hectic rhythm of the modern city makes us to forget this. Now is time to forget the forgetting. With Treasure Hill Taiwan can find its own way towards urban ecology.

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Marco Casagrande is a Finnish architect and urban planner and visiting professor in Tamkang University. In his work he is focused in the research of environmental technology solutions as the bases of site specific urban ecology. Casagrande represented Taiwan in this year's Venice Biennale in the Taiwan Pavillion exhibition *Paradise Revisited*, curated by Roan Chin-Yueh.

## DATA BOX

### **MBT**

Mechanical Biological Treatment is the anaerobic bacteria based closed system (in-vessel) fermentation process of bio waste. Depending on the waste the whole treatment process from raw material to top soil, water and gas takes 7 – 14 days. The gas conditioning plant burns the methane gas into electricity of which 25% goes into running the MBT unit and 75% can be sold back to the city. The highly controlled MBT -fermentation process does not produce smell of health risks and can be applied as a localized urban waster treatment solution instead of centralized incinerators as in Taipei. With MBT –technology the recycling of waste material is practically 100%.