“what kind of architecture could there be, should the architect choose not to pursue the symbolic meaning, the need for visual impact, or the strong personal possessive instinct? How do we forsake the motivation to create the so-called 'solid' construction? How do we break free from such temptation? Is there no other ways for architecture to survive but to stand tall and arrogant? Can we create something that is able to humbly lie on its face, sustain external forces and bring about much sense of joy at the same time?” (Kuma, 2004)

AREA OF RESEARCH

The topic I would like to pursue for my thesis project concern the dissolution and disintegration of architecture. I became interested in this topic whilst doing my bachelor degree. I responded sympathetically when reading the book by Kengo Kuma, Makeru Kenchiku (“negative architecture”) (Kuma, 2004), regarding the situation of modern architecture. In the book, he protested against the design philosophy that the built structures (architectures) were erected regardless of their the natural surroundings (contexts). This is later on supported by his another book called “Anti-object: the dissolution and disintegration of architecture” (Kuma, 2008). I have borrowed the name here to illustrate the aim of my thesis project: that is to explore the potential for architecture to be dissolved and ‘blend’ into its environmental context, to become soft, modest and perceptible for people; rather than an abstract manmade object created with the power of modernism.

Research questions to be answered

What is the extent of isolation of architecture as it is currently and what is the problem it would possibly bring to us in the future?
What are the reasons which caused such isolation?
Where can I find exact examples in order to illustrate and realize the dissolution and disintegration of architecture? Can I find any similar precedent in other forms of art?
How can I develop my own methodology in order to realize this dissolution and disintegration by researching the existing precedents?
What testbed or location should I choose to test this methodology?

The reason for researching this

Architecture has been increasingly associated with economies and politics to serve as symbols by means of modern technologies. In the meantime, to satisfy people’s visual instinct, volume is expanding in both height and width while materials used for the construction tend to be more and more abstract. Though human being’s temptation could keep growing endlessly, the expansion, abstraction and symbolisation of architecture can be limited. When the limit is reached, it’s hard to say whether architecture is still meaningful, understandable and perceptible. As Peter Zumthor argues, “Postmodern life could be described as a state in which everything beyond our own personal biography seems vague, blurred, and somehow unreal.” (Zumthor, 2006). Further more, it could be evident that the modern world we are living now has already encountered this problem. Therefore, I believe that it would be a valuable topic to discuss how we “lay down” and “dissolve” the architecture in which progress visual aesthetic standards could be redefined to respect the beauty of real/tangible things rather than abstract signs; so that by this means we could probably not be separated from our personal biography and the original experience from the nature rather than setting off to the non-return route to self isolation.
PREVIOUS KNOWLEDGE

My background of being a citizen in Hangzhou, a large city in China that makes me aware of this problem in person very early before I became an architecture student. The western modernism has greatly influence the form of urban structure and architecture in my city. Isolated Modern high-rise buildings taking over the places of traditional and conventional Chinese architecture complex, making little, if any, relation with each other as well as the city. The elderly becomes separated from their neighbours and lives in flats instead of their familiar old houses.

Dating back to my childhood, traditional Chinese style dwellings taught me what a eastern style is. All the buildings seemed to be ambiguous with no obvious boundaries of spaces and even lack the definition for what a space should be. It is the combined experience of various elements: light, sound, material, touch and together with the environment that made up an architecture rather than the symbol or volume of the structure that stands for. The relationship between people are also firmly connected and well established. This is a real experience of how I feel architecture disintegrates into its environment.

By comparing the past and current situation of the architecture in my city, I found out that it would be helpful to be inspired from some original way of dissolving architecture in the eastern culture and then enhance it with the western modern way.

METHODOLOGY

My initial methodology is literature review. “A literature review is necessary in formulating the theoretical framework of the research.”(Bryman, 1994) By reading literature about my topic, I would get a profound insight of what is the current knowledge with regard to this issue. As shown in the bibliography, theories of how architects think about the problem of architectural isolation could be explored to provide a deeper understanding of the reason why this issue emerges. However, literature review is not only about existing theory. I am more interested in how architects work in a practical way to realize the dissolution and disintegration of architecture. Their design process and their way of developing methodology would offer me much more information to think about my own way in approaching my aim. “As you read, get into the habit of examining how authors classify their findings, how they explore relationships between facts and how facts and relationships are explained..They may give you ideas about how you might categorize your own data,and ways in which you may be able to draw on the work of other researchers to support or refute your own arguments and conclusions.”(Bell, 1987) Furthermore, it is also interesting to find out how other artist cooperate with this issues. Surprisingly, the way of dissolution could be dated back to the period of impressionism as well as the traditional Japanese Ukiyo-e, giving me extra inspiration beyond the boundaries of architecture thinking.

Case study would also be important for me to look at detailed ways of how a dissolution could be process and what it would be like in reality. Due to my previous knowledge, I tend to seek for traditional eastern ways in architecture and landscape design as it is, to some extent, opposite to approaches of western modernism. It is more about modesty, dissolution, being ambiguous with the natural space, which could potentially indicate a way toward the dissolution of architecture in modern world. I choose Fang Ta Park as a case to research as it consists of plenty of ways to dissolve space by both traditional ways and western approaches.

Further case study and literature review should be done in the next stage to provide more information especially on how eastern architectural approaches could help with my topic. Mappings would be essential in the next coming stage to help myself set up a clear framework of what I collected. By studying mappings, a further inspiration may I get to go on with the development of my own methodology.
The situation of isolation

(Translations from Chinese edition)

In this book, Kengo Kuma explained reasons why architecture today seem to be so isolated from the environment. A key problem is the excessive abstraction of material. Utilising distinctive material has become the first thing before a construction of a building. The distinctive material is the one who is different with the objects which the surrounding environment is consist of, such as concrete and steel products. All of these are created by mankind, they cannot be found in the nature before they being produced. Thus, it is difficult for people to associate architecture made of this distinctive material with the environment and finally recognise them as isolated objects. In addition, the growing volume of architecture is against the scale of the nature and human body. Finally, the high costs of architecture leads to the fact that architecture has become a privilege for wealthy people and do not actually help to gain income for its workers. Thus, it continues being isolated in the city, embodied as political and economic tools, rather than the representing the physical and appreciable environment.


“*The world is full of signs and information, which stand for things that none fully understands because they, too, turn out to be mere signs for other things. Yet the real thing remains hidden. No one ever gets to see it. Nevertheless, I am convinced that real things do exist, however endangered they may be. There are earth and water, the light of the sun, landscapes ...which are what they are, which are not mere vehicles for an artistic message, and whose presence is self-evident. “* Peter Zumthor shares similar criticism with Kengo Kuma in addressing the architecture problem in the modern world. It seems architecture has been symbolised too much so that it become isolated from any real things that are tangible in our living environment. Zumthor’s work is always well known by approaching real things: site, material, light, memory, which is an honest way to dissolve architecture with perceivable elements in the environment. It would be important to look at his work to see how a real building is constructed to get close to the surrounding site.
Development of Methodology in Practices

With MAKERU KENCHIKU (Kuma, 2004) talking more about the theoretical issues of architecture's isolation, Anti-Object shows Kengo Kuma's own effort to realize this dissolution by reviewing his own designing process. It is a modest book to show his alternative methodologies of how to realize this aim into reality rather than showing us a single outcome. It serves as a good example for me especially in the stage of designing in this project about how to analyse the information in site and later utilize them into the process of disintegrating architecture. In the meantime, It shows how important to test different kinds of approaches in site so that a deeper understanding of this issue could emerge. Failures could be seen in the first several experiments when he was designing Kirosan Observatory. However, those failures are quite helpful for him to understand how to erase architecture in a suitable way. "Using a transparent material such as glass is not always enough to erase an object. Anything that is set on a pedestal becomes an object, regardless of what it is made of or how discreetly it is placed...However, the scheme was still premised on a levelled site...I was taking a stance that was both critical and conservative...I decided to abandon the scheme I had developed and take another approach based on burial..."


It is a book which concludes a series of public space un-volumetric architecture examples as well as articles. Volume could be one aspect of architecture that could potentially be dissolved into the environment. It is valuable to look at how different architects understand and realize the un-volumetric architecture. For example, in the chapter of “Shelters”, different architects have different attitudes towards shelters, the primary element of architecture, some of which really disappeared into the environment well. Kengo Kuma also wrote an article in the book, expressing his process of transforming volume into holes. Holes represents the particles of architecture that he attempted to create to dissolve the form and volume.

Inspiration from Sculpture
Work by Jaume Plensa

Jaume Plensa is an international sculptor in Barcelona. His way of transforming his sculpture provides inspiration for me. Volumes, weight, measurement have been magically melted away. It is clever that he used the light to make the iron lose its weight. It would be interesting to ask how can architecture lose its weight by using the light, which is a conventional element in architecture theory but can potentially be explored further. His other pieces of work exhibited in Yorkshire Park see an amazing relationship between the sculpture, people, and the landscape (Plensa, 2006).

Plensa, Jaume, 2006, Transforming Energy, *Sculpture Magazine*

“If you think about material, for example, you don’t necessarily have to think about weight, you can instead think about energy... In my work, I like to transform this energy into an object.” In the conversation, he described his work in Desir and La neige Rouge in 1991 when he added light to the cast iron. “While working in the foundry with cast iron, I was fascinated by the light of the glowing red substance. When iron is molten, it is pure light. It completely loses it weight.”
Jaume Plensa’s Exhibition in Yorkshire Park

“YSP presents an extraordinary body of new and recent work by renowned Spanish artist Jaume Plensa. Encouraging tactile and sensory exploration, this vibrant exhibition includes a 50-metre curtain of poetry made of suspended steel letters, large illuminated sculptures in the landscape, and engraved gongs that visitors can strike to fill the gallery with sound.” (http://www.ysp.co.uk/exhibitions/jaume-plensa)

Inspiration from painting
Impressionism
Impressionist usually use tiny brush strokes to express the light, dissolving details and forms of their subjects, leaving the audience an impression of a certain light and atmosphere. The art movement of impression led to the Impressionist music and impression literature. It may be possible to emerge the Impressionist Architecture in which architecture can be also dissolved into particles so that form and volume could disappear while its atmosphere could still be experienced.

Utagawa Hiroshige
“Hiroshige is a Japanese Ukiyo-e artist and one of the last great artists in that tradition” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hiroshige). He dissolves the image by using the wood block printing technology. Layers of ink is overlapped to form a sense of space while notches are used to form the atmosphere of rainy day, melting away shapes in the painting. His works also influenced French Impressionists such as Monet. When paintings could be dissolved by conventional skills, maybe there is also some potentials for architecture to be dissolved by traditional techniques or materials. The overlapped color in his painting also indicates that space could be rendered and experienced by a more ambiguous way.
Case Study
Fang Ta Park, Shanghai, designed by Feng Ji Zhong

Fang Ta Park is built in 1980s for the purpose of protection of Fang Ta, a historical pagoda in Song Dynasty. It is known as one of the best examples in China which has done a lot of effort in disintegrating architectural space in the whole park. As has been shown in the picture, it is interesting to compare the traditional eastern and modern western way of using sculpture as a indication of a route. As been shown in the images below, in Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion, walls with precise right angle indicated a very clear routes toward the human sculpture which exposures towards the visitor directly. However, in the Fang Ta Park, routes are more naturally guided with the surrounding environment as well as the horse sculpture half hidden behind the bamboos. In this atmosphere, spaces consist much more uncertainly and reduce the visibility of themselves.

This dissolution has been presented best in He Lo Xuan, a pavillion inside the park, where the architect transformed the traditional heavy Chinese roof into extremely light and floating style. The approach is to color every node black so that the structure which are suffering with weight become unstable, making the entire huge roof much lighter.