

Borrowed landscape: Rediscovering "originality" from mimicry, a journey to the chinese contemporary architectural landscape

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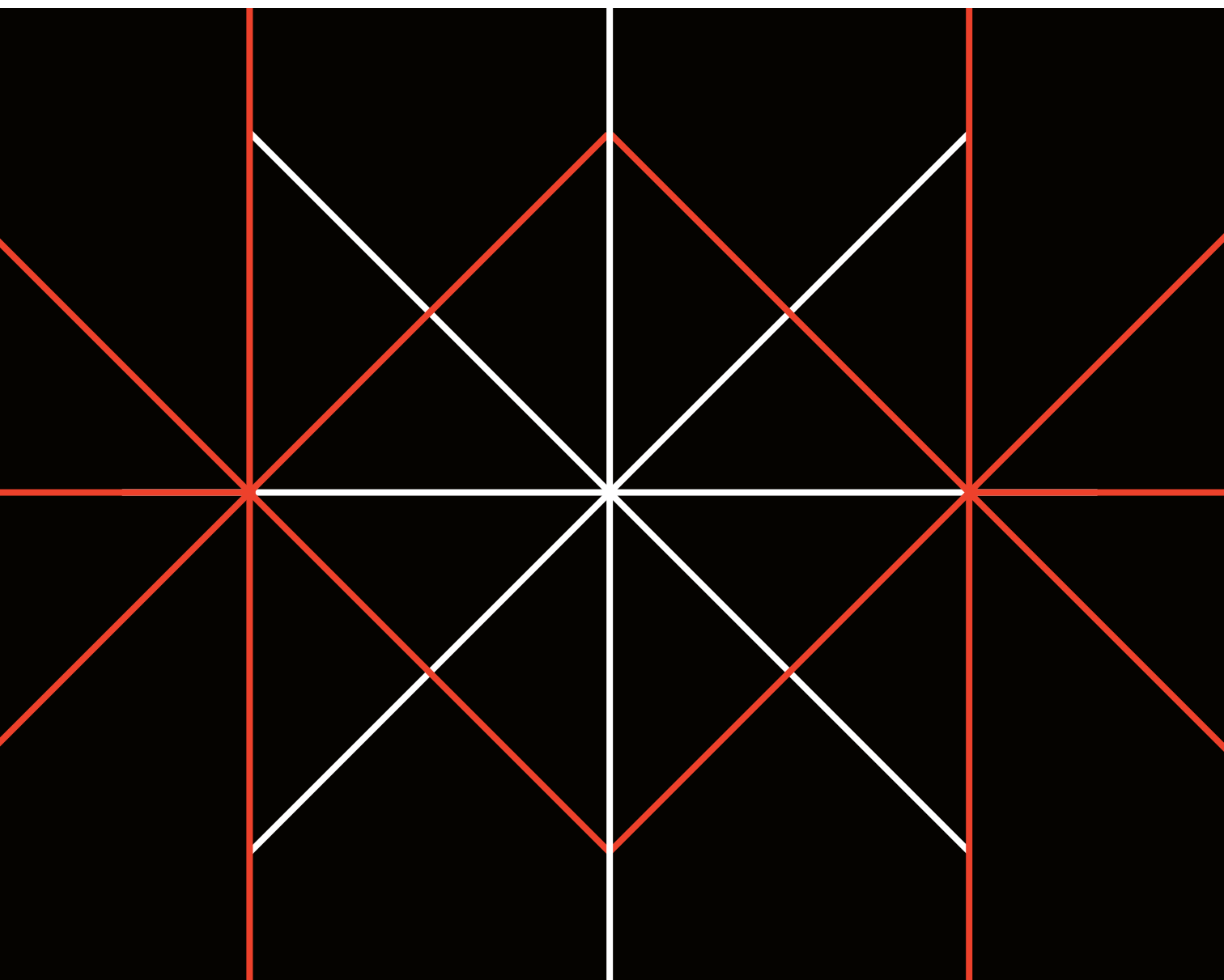
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# SPACE

**DASP Yearbook 2023**





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DASP Yearbook 2023

PhD in Architecture.  
History and Project

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# BORROWED LANDSCAPE: REDISCOVERING “ORIGINALITY” FROM MIMICRY, A JOURNEY TO THE CHINESE CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURAL LANDSCAPE.



## Francesca La Monaca

Cycle  
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Research Group  
**China Room**

The ‘borrowed landscape’ is a Chinese garden design method in which the designed space is enhanced through elements of the external landscape. In its original theory, the principle of “borrowing scenery” (Jie jing 借景) allows the incorporation of distant landscapes, creating an illusionary expansion of the space that eradicates the rigid boundaries that traditionally separate interior and exterior spaces. Starting from this concept, the contemporary development of the notion points to the Chinese diffuse architectural attitude of “borrowing” landscapes that are distant in time and space. The research aims to verify whether the garden design concept of “borrowing” may extend to how outdoor space is conceived in real estate housing design. The existence of countless examples of almost caricatured projects inspired by European or American stylistic features and reviving traditional Chinese architecture has prompted a fervent debate on the quality and legitimacy of such operations. The topic of authenticity and originality is deconstructed to gain an understanding of how the reinvention of aesthetic canons and historical values allowed Chinese design to navigate the uncertain landscapes of commercial estates. Today several Chinese developers have turned to architectural mimicry to project an image of modernity and sophistication. In these architectural projects, even if the results are sometimes considered kitsch or of low value, there exists an endeavor to encapsulate the quintessen-

ce of these replicated styles, which sometimes create illusory realities in which authenticity and hyperreality merge into a fabricated atmosphere that promises the experience of cultural tradition. The ongoing discourse regarding the delicate equilibrium between replication and originality, as well as the dynamic interplay between reality and artfully constructed ambiances in architecture, inevitably opens the discussion to the acceptability of certain operations which, on the one hand, are the result of a desire of discovering the culture of countries, and on the other, follow strictly commercial interests that have slight to do with sensitivity to national history. The same is true in China for both local and foreign replicas, which have become an intriguing attraction for consumers who perceive the Western landscape and cities of the imperial past, as epitomes of quality, wealth, and well-being, signifying the achievement of a high economic and social status. The notion of the image and imaginary takes on a distinct meaning, wherein the ideal becomes the foundation for creating the space by replicating architectural elements

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Chinese architecture market trends: re-invention of European and Chinese classical style  
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that generate immersive experiences, which, as designed for the pleasure of the public, inevitably turn out to be “counterfeited” or “fake”, where the intent is to reproduce the original context and time. To better be able to understand this panorama, the first part of the thesis will focus on first synthesizing the landscape of the real estate market, to then discern the question of originality and copying, to reasonably evaluate the merit of the evolution process of architecture and the ongoing landscape in China. The entirely negative interpretation of copying will be seen here as superficial, so the question of imitation and representation will be deconstructed in all possible outcomes. The culture of copying is not historically alien to either Europe or China as a method for acquiring and seizing knowledge, although the philosophical and cultural tradition translates into two different visions of imitation and representation. In China historically, the ability to create good copy is a hallmark and indicator of technological superiority, and perfecting the copy makes it possible to reach the essence of the original; in Europe, emulating the master makes it still conceivable to achieve beauty, skills, and understanding nature. Only recently has the concept of emulation been stigmatized and replaced by the notion of originality as the leading quality criterion. This rejection of copying is likely due to a view from the age of industrialization, in which copyright is seen as unassailable because of the ease with which products can be reproduced, without considering instead the innumerable phenomena that generate currents, through the processes of appropriation, incorporation, discovery, and replication. Turning to architecture and using the example of the historical Chinese garden as an emblem of the relationship between space and representation, the thesis will focus in-depth on contemporary Chinese tendencies of replication. The question of originality and the value of imitation will be discussed through the trend of Shanzhai architecture (Shanzhai Jianzhu 山寨建筑) and New Chinese Style (Xin Zhongshi 新中式) to understand how the reinvention of aesthetic canons and historical values leads to the evolution of national design in the current panorama. To conclude, the term “borrowed landscape” here refers to all those methods of replication, copying, mimicry, and imitation of distant landscapes that have been incorporated into the designed space and that have enabled the development of alternative architecture brought the Chinese landscape of project and planning, to a progress that is internationally recognized as remarkable. Through a collection of case studies, interviews, a literature review, and an analysis of trade and general magazines, the thesis will first attempt to understand how the historical values of Chinese design and the aesthetic-experimental perception of space have led to the contemporary culture of copying in architecture today, and then to identify the changes in the real estate market, to the point of re-appropriating the elements of traditional architectural culture, to discover how the emerging generation of designers is excelling at capturing the themes of a globalized millennial culture combining historical, artistic, and technological influences with a forward-looking perspective.



“The PhD Program in Architecture. History and Project (DASP) was born out of two long lasting traditions of doctoral level studies and research in the area of Architecture at Politecnico di Torino. The PhD Program programmatically investigates the complexity of architectural cultures starting from the multi-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary interweaving between the history and the design of buildings, cities, territories.

On the one hand, in fact, urban and architectural composition and technology of architecture favor an interpretation of the project as a tool for measuring the stratifications of theoretical elaborations, technical

innovations and modifications of built environment.

On the other hand, the historical disciplines for architecture and the city, far from a local vision and thanks to the cooperation with other histories (the economic, social, anthropological and aesthetic ones), trace paths that can be traveled by architects and urban planners, but also by other humanities scholars, such as philosophers and linguists”

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Marco Trisciuglio

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(from the document Proposal for the accreditation of doctorates - a.y. 2023/2024, presented to the Italian Ministry of University and Research on June 5th, 2023)

