

Residual Thinking:

Reclaiming Hong Kong's Lost Urban Spaces.

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ABSTRACT: *Hong Kong is an extreme city: extreme consumerism set against intense urban inhabitation, radical authenticity juxtaposed to severe topography, whichever way you read Hong Kong there are never any half measures. Compelled to this vertiginous density, Hong Kong is an amalgam of conditions, that came into existence due to a hostility settlement between China and Britain over the trading of narcotics, and developed from a "barren rock", into a 7 million plus metropolis with the 8th largest trading economy in the world. Throughout its history, Hong Kong has always adapted, mitigating territorial as well as political situations to produce a concentrated and vertical city. Residual thinking relates to interpreting our present urban environment for what it really is, vis-à-vis the convergence of natural and artificial forces that jostle for control. From the Latin "residuus", meaning left over, the word residual has become synonymous with a number of terms that describe the status of our contemporary city: non-spaces, anti-spaces and vacant spaces. The residual condition, it can be argued, has become the common lexicon through which we discuss and read our urban environment, a different form of waste that relates to the opportunities, not problems.*

KEYWORDS: *Hong Kong, Urban Conditions, Residual Urban Spaces, Background Architecture, Urban Prototypes.*

1. INTRODUCTION



Figure 1: Book Tree Prototype, Mei Foo Estate, Hong Kong.
Photo P.W. Ferretto

This paper focuses on the lost urban spaces of Hong Kong, circumstantial spaces that were neither planned nor designed but simply arose due to a complex array of overlapping reasons. Their status has always been ambiguous, with ownership, management and governing regulations frequently varying. What appears, on the surface, as a public domain is, in reality, a highly controlled space with blurred ownership, governed by an intricate web of independently acting institutions.

Many of the conditions within Hong Kong, are a derivative of a highly engineered city, where adaptive solutions generate an invisible background. Through the insertion of design prototype this paper seeks to demonstrate how such leftover spaces can be inhabited by temporary architectural insertions that foster awareness, community participation and importantly work within a different time frame from traditional architectural projects that are typically too static, expensive and non-flexible.

1.1 Defining the Residual

"On the most physical level, the environment prompts people to think of the public domain as meaningless" (Sennett, 2002, p. 12)

In the opening chapter of the "The Fall of Public Man" Richard Sennett makes reference to the idea of "Dead Spaces", disengaged spaces with a meaningless public domain and no diversity of activities, "a space that you move through, not a space to be in". Although Sennett does not refer to the notion of the residual, the isolation and disconnection he alludes to has direct parallels with the urban by-product spaces we discuss in this paper.

In the present academic and professional debate, the word residual has multiple disguises (Abandoned, By-product, Buffer, Detached, Dual Use, Empty, Fringe, Hidden, Incoherent, Intermediate, Infrastructural, Left-

over, Lost, Neglected, Remainder, Surplus, Vacant, Undesirable and White spaces) that have come to define the urban architectural zeitgeist. However, the underlying connotations of the term revolves around two distinct positions, one theoretical and the other practical, that allow us to differentiate between how we should interpret and react to transitional urban zones.

The theoretical position as argued in the 90's by the Catalan architect and urbanist Ignasi de Sola-Morales who defines such spaces as the "Terrain Vague" (Sola-Morales - Rubio, 1995) of our cities, indispensable buffer zones that allow cities to breathe, expand and contract, through a membrane of heterogenous locations that accommodate unpredictability. In other words, indeterminate areas that our cities need to be able to adapt and survive the straight jacket of modern planning and building regulations – an inbuilt tolerance system to allow freedom.

The counter position, instigated by performance artists such as Gordon Matta-Clark, who in the 1970's explored how vacant plots in New Jersey could be reclaimed and appropriated has today evolved to an consolidated architectural position initiated by socially motivated architectural practices such as Raumbaum (Austria) who see the issue in reverse. Rather than constituting an breathing gap within the city, these plots offer a unique opportunity for the community to challenge the planning status quo.

1.2 Learning from Hong Kong

Ever since moving to Hong Kong, I have been struck by how, due to the city's urban density, the city seamlessly inhabits its urban infrastructure. The examples are multiple, ranging from domestic workers colonizing the elevated pedestrian walkways every Sunday in Central to the illegal gambling stations located below concrete bridges in the Newtown of Tin Shui Wan. In a similar manner as "Learning from Las Vegas" (Venturi, Scott Brown, & Izenour, 1972) which famously postulated a reading of the city (non-city in their case) through a taxonomy of mundane conditions: casinos, hotels, churches and parking lots, Hong Kong's residual spaces offer an altogether new reading of our present Asian city. To demonstrate the case we use three examples that represent the tip of the iceberg, regarding how we can learn from Hong Kong's "second-hand spaces".

The first example relates to an interstitial forgotten slot located in the heart of Tsim Sha Tsui, one of Hong Kong's busiest commercial districts in Kowloon. The plot is wedged between a high-way flyover (Kowloon Park Drive) and the end of a dense urban block, where the awkward geometry of the site prevents any profitable development of the land, hence this in-between situation is transformed into a stealth den of

heterogenous activities amalgamated under an ingenious light roof structure.

Diverse programmes that require flexible, temporary and low rental conditions to survive are able to colonize the space and coexist with each other. The Haiphong Road Temporary Market includes a Hallah meat market adjacent to a whole sale flower stall, jammed against a cluster of Dai Pai Dong (street food stalls) structures combine to create an authentic atmosphere straight out of a scene from a Wong Kai Wan film.



Figure 2Figure 3: Hill Road Viaduct, Sai Ting Pun, Hong Kong. Photo P.W. Ferretto

The second example is a cathedral like space situated in Pok Fu Lam, where a vertiginous elevated Hill Road highway meanders perilously through a cluster of residential buildings, perched on a steep terrain. The resulting by-product void is left vacant for 50/52 week of the year – literally a wasted space. However in early February, for a fortnight, the site is metamorphosed into a temporary spiritual festival housing a Chinese theatre, various temples and a shrine all built out of bamboo. The beauty of this intervention demonstrates how a mistaken situation, allows the traces, history and memories of the site to survive. Even with the advent of modernization and technology, local rituals survive and adapt.

Hong Kong is not renowned for its urban grid, unlike Manhattan or Barcelona, its urban fabric is conceived as an organic reaction to the surrounding topography, where urban zones are tailored to the existing uneven landscape, generating a highly bespoke engineered territory. Ensnared within this hectic infrastructural framework lies the Sham Shui Po grid and its associated urban block, is our third example.

Built in the 1920's by the British, this 50x 100m block was conceived as a strategic network to facilitate the transport of military ammunition, becoming over the years the home of the city's textile trade. Rather than the block being an example of a residual type, it represents a system of interconnected micro residual moments. The void beneath the stairs becomes a watch repair shop, roof terraces turn out to be occupied

fringes, a standard family apartment is subdivided to a cluster of micro units, the back alley doubles up as electronic workshops, every space has at least three indentities.



Figure 3: Sham Shui Po Urban Block, Axonometric. Drawings by Carol Wong, CUHK Masters Student.

These examples, and there are many more in Hong Kong, represent the resilient city that fights back, episodes where marginal sites generate bespoke informal solutions. Such meta-spaces, light and temporary everyday structures are inexpensive, adaptable and easily demountable. They operate as a system, are extremely organized and mutate to the complex contemporary urban issues.

Each example alludes to an alternative urban metabolism that is frequently ignored but is critical to how Hong Kong operates. Specifically, in the context of this sustainability conference, it allows the discourse to run off-piste and digress, addressing environmental issues from an altogether alternative perspective to the prevalent concern to minimizing human environmental impact. Paradoxically the discussion here becomes about maximizing the potential of given urban conditions to achieve a form of ecological balance that has long eluded the city. At a time when Hong Kong is confronted by the spectre of the generic, when most of the city's recent developments seem to segregate rather than unite communities, the residual offers an alternative form of urban inhabitation.

2. THE MEI FOO PROTOTYPE

To demonstrate how this residual latent energy can be transformed into customized temporary public spaces, our research team (with the funding of a research grant from Research Grant Council of Hong Kong, titled "Urban Pauses: Reclaiming Hong Kong's Residual Urban Spaces" grant number 14611017) embarked on designing and building an urban prototype that would allow us to better understand how such potential spaces could be inhabited.

2.1 Urban Prototype

The architectural prototype is a vessel to test and to challenge conventional readings. In the context of this paper the prototype is conceived as an architectural organism: object, event, regulation that reacts to a given context, relying importantly on a feedback mechanism to evolve into a given proposal. As adaptive structures, prototypes respond to specific conditions, using materials that may not necessarily be meant for final production and complete designs. The role of the prototype is to be unique and test original ideas, a design fragment which challenges preconceived thinking and leading to a radical change of position.

Contrary to conventional architecture, the prototype relates to temporary and adaptive design solutions. In this respect, they are similar to the idea of "Magnet" (Price, 2012) coined by the British architect Cedric Price, vis-à-vis Price's theoretical position relies on magnets being facilities with inherent possibilities of change, growth and adaptability compared to buildings. Price argues that architects often see buildings as a cure for social problems, a role he believes they are singularly ill-suited to, as they are: too slow, too solid and too late. The architectural prototype, as a context-sensitive design, serves as a working model for the implementation in numerous analogous situations. The prototype as a paradigm encourages a rethinking of existing ecosystems in order to incorporate novel expressions as well as new performances.



Figure 4: Mei Foo Estate, Aerial View. Image taken from Google Earth.

2.2 The Mei Foo Estate

The Mei Foo estate built in phases between the late 60s and 70's is the first private housing estate in Hong Kong, accommodating between 70,000 – 80,000 residents in 99 identical towers with 13,500 apartments. The complex entirely built on reclaimed land from the harbour, embodies many of the ideas put forward by French architect and urbanist Le Corbusier who in 1925 presented his "Plan Voisin" vision, a radial proposal (never built) to demolish a vast area of central Paris and replace it with a new high density city.

What is striking about the Mei Foo estate, contrary to the Plan Voisin position, is how, due to the extreme

density and tropical climate of Hong Kong, it is not the vast expanses of open green space “where the air is clear and pure” to quote Le Corbusier, that public engage with but paradoxically the underside of the Kwai Chung flyover. A space that normally would be considered as a negative and redundant space is transformed into an asset for the whole community.

To understand the importance public space plays for the people of Hong Kong, one has to know that the average living area per person in Hong Kong is 4.5m². In this perspective, the notion of rethinking the city’s residual spaces takes on a new dimension. They are no longer wasted spaces but become imminent opportunities for transformation, public assets latent with potential energy to change. 80,000 people require a multitude of public amenities, which due to Hong Kong’s chronic lack of space, are situated directly into the underside of the elevated flyover, converting a 1km stretch of infrastructural space into the heart of the neighbourhood. A wet market, medical clinic, community centre, bus depot, flower whole seller and public toilet are all housed here. The resulting public space defies conventional classifications, primarily because the space was not designed as a public event space but arose out of a derivative situation, an adaptive situation. Every programme sets up an artificial relationship with the context a form of interior urbanism.



Figure 5: Mei Foo Municipal Wet Market. Photo P.W.Ferretto.

2.3 Book Tree Prototype

Book Tree is a research project conceived by Associate Professor Peter W. Ferretto at the School of Architecture at The Chinese University of Hong Kong, in collaboration with the Mei Foo District Counsellor Ambrose Cheung. The objective of the project is twofold: to inhabit a lost urban space and simultaneously to create a new type of reading experience for children within the Mei Foo neighbourhood.

Due to its high density and unique topography, Hong Kong has a high concentration of residual urban spaces, spaces that are not planned and typically occur by accident. These lost spaces have become invisible to

local people who usually dismiss them as mundane background places devoid of purpose. Our research started from the notion that through design, such spaces can be activated and transformed into inhabitable places. Rather than design being a high-end service, the predominant case in Hong Kong, design here becomes a tool to transform a neglected corner beneath a flyover into a real open community space.



Figure 6: Book Tree Prototype, August 2018. Photo P.W. Ferretto

Libraries are typically associated with quiet and studious spaces. The idea behind the “Book Tree” is to install a structure where children can play while reading, rather than a chore reading books becomes a fun experience. The temporary installation is composed of two elements, an open timber landscape to sit down and a tree structure that holds books. The structure was conceived as a tree where the different branches each house books for different ages. The structure was built from untreated timber as to reconnect children to the warmth of natural materials contrasted to the mineral and hard materiality of the surrounding infrastructure.

The manner in which the “Book Tree” operates is unique in Hong Kong. Books are not registered nor borrowed, they are simply donated by the community for the community to take freely. There is no trading, no promise to return, the tree acts as a temporary deposit for the many books Mei Foo households can no longer store.

This dynamic sharing system creates a sense of pride in an otherwise transitional space between A and B. The Mei Foo estate built in phases between 1968 and 1978, comprises 99 residential towers housing more than 70,000 residents within 13,500 apartments. It is one of Hong Kong’s first private housing estates and is bisected by Kwai Chung Road. It was selected as the site for our first prototype due to its unique inhabitation of residual spaces below the highway, which include a community centre, a clinic and wet market.

2.4 Book Tree Description

The “Book Tree” occupies 25 m², consisting of a tree structure of bookshelves surrounded by an undulating interactive sitting and reading platform. The tree structure is made of pre-fabricated timber components that are assembled and dismantled by students in 1-2 days, while the platform consists of 50 (600x600 mm) timber boxes of different height. The tree structure is lined with a waterproof fabric, which provides sun and rain protection. It is equipped with LED lighting for reading.



Figure 7: Book Tree Prototype, Children interacting with the Structure. Photo P.W. Ferretto

2.5 Design, Fabrication and Planning Process

Potentially the most valuable lesson and source of knowledge the “Book Tree” generated relates to the uncovering of the implementations process behind the realization of a project of this kind. So called residual spaces in Hong Kong are highly regulated spaces governed by specific government departments who follow strict rules as to their use and programme. In the case of the Mei Foo viaduct, the site is controlled by the Lands Department of Hong Kong, who in turn have to consult several other departments such as the Police, Community Groups, Health and Safety Department before consenting approval for the installation of a temporary structure.

The fabrication of the prototype had to follow one very important constraint, the whole structure had to be built and erected for less than 50,000 HKD (the project was self-financed by the team, with no outside funding). For these reasons we opted for a timber structure that could be erected by students, rather than contractors, and we sourced the timber pieces from a timber merchant in Dongguan, Mainland China, who helped cut to size all the pieces.

The design process relied on a series of workshops with the District Council and presentations to the Local Leaders and community representatives. What was evident was the how all parties responded to the physicality of the project and immediately understood

the project idea through a model. To be noted also was the importance of the “tree” metaphor that enabled all parties to identify with the story and understand how children would respond.



Figure 8: Study model used to explain the Design. Photo P. W. Ferretto

5. CONCLUSION

In an article titled “Alternative Urban Design Strategies” the sociologist Saskia Sassen (2006) relates her informal economic theory “Novel Assemblage” directly to the city pointing out that architecture needs to engage directly with unforthcoming spaces, elaborating a “another architecture” to occupy today’s massive urban infrastructures. Large cities, in her view, contain a diversity of under-used spaces, which often lie outside today’s logical spatial frames.

It is exactly these spaces that this paper believes are an essential part of the interiority of the city and that any proposal to reactivate or inhabit them has got to avoid, the predictable Hong Kong developer mindset, which only seeks to maximize their real estate value. New practices have to be sought out, steering away from an architecture of permanence, towards a temporary architecture of interventions that subvert and reactivate abandoned public spaces, to borrow Sassen’s analogy, barefoot architects working like China’s barefoot doctors. We do not aim to present one solution to one specific site, rather present a spectrum of possibilities in the form of architectural prototypes exploit the potential conditions of existing residual spaces.

The cultural identity of a place from an anthropological perspective, as argued by the Hong Kong based anthropologist Gordon Matthews, has historically been associated with the “way of life of the people”. In this context, Hong Kong’s cultural identity is, and one can argue has always been, in a state of flux, neither cultural ‘pure’ nor culturally ‘free’. Hong Kong is a city that lies between extreme polarities: political, national, economic and architectural. In architectural terms: extremely formal (designed and branded architecture)

contrasted with the informal unplanned organic city (adaptive, temporary and spontaneous architecture), between these two architectural positions lie the conditions of Hong Kong.

Condition is a word with multiple readings; as a noun it relates the state of something, vis-à-vis its appearance, quality and circumstances. While as a verb it implies: influence, constraint and control. These two understandings are critical in/to the thesis of this article; on the one hand the urban condition narrates the physical characteristics of our city, what I describe in the first part of the article as the situations that belong to the “background city” and how everyday practices of inhabitation, the hyper local, establish a form of “urban dialect” which in the most part remains extraneous to the authorities that plan our cities. The second position, the notion that reflects the meaning associated with influence and control, relies on observation and interpretation., though schematization/modelling.

Most of the conditions highlighted in this article would not typically be associated with an /the recognized identity of Hong Kong, they represent a taxonomy of the “other” Hong Kong to borrow the concept coined by Foucault(Foucault, 1984). In-between worlds, neither here nor there, that belong somewhere between utopia and dystopia, the heterotopia of Foucault, act as vessels connecting the city to its roots, to the memories of a world not so far away, that has evolved into the present condition. Foucault remarks that the perfect example of heterotopia is a boat, a floating piece of space that belongs to no fixed place except the infinity of the sea.

To conclude, as several hundred million more people are expected to move to cities in East Asia over the next 20 years as economies shift from agriculture and manufacturing to services, when the China’s Pearl River Delta has overtaken Tokyo to become the world’s largest urban area in both size and population, Hong Kong is in a strategic position both geographically and politically to examine the role of what our cities are, rather than what they might become. Understanding urban conditions as a set of relationships, places of deviations, where the real life, which today seems so incompatible with our/the prescribed social needs of the people, actually takes place.

Architecture has a fundamental role to help society, it is our ambition that this humble insertion can rekindle a sense of pride and joy for the children of the neighbourhood.

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