

***In Search of Wellness in Hong Kong:
The Evolution of Delusive Public Space in the Metropolis***

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Abstract

Growing from a fishing village with a small population to one of the most densely populated city and globally recognized economic body — Hong Kong has transformed into a world-renowned city with a unique history and vivid lifestyle, which has deemed her many mysteries that yet to be unfolded. However, with minimal effort spent in city planning since the colonial period, Hong Kong has never had an accessible urban lung that allows its citizens to destress. The lack of urban planning aided real estate developers to almost abuse public space as a standard practice, which further encouraged the culture of materialistic living in a subtle way. It somewhat suggested that diversified, convenient and efficient vertical living might have become the counter-argument for wellness living. During the recent social movement in Hong Kong, the notion of public and private space was being further challenged, where streets were taken over and infrastructures were organically re-programmed as exhibition galleries organically. The complexity of urbanization makes Hong Kong an ideal pedagogy to explore the tension between space use and mental health. This paper studies the evolution in the perception and cognition of public space in Hong Kong and focuses on privately owned public spaces that exist in the form of shopping malls. This mall-orientated development approach manipulates the way of living and impacts the mental health of the population, challenging both their understanding of public space and its importance to our everyday urban life.

Keywords: Heterotopia, Juxtaposition, Junkspace, Hong Kong, Shopping mall, Real Estate Development, Urban Planning, Architecture, Cognitive Mapping, Kinesthetic learning of spaces

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Introduction



(Figure 1: Top-down image of a high-end shopping mall, Festival Walk, that was built on top of a mass-transit railway station with office towers on top of it. It is a typical scene in Hong Kong's shopping malls where escalators are flying over the atrium space as connectors)

Hong Kong is a world-class city that is a geopolitical actor in all dimensions in the world today— both sectional and intersectional. This Southeast-Asian city carries the legacy of being a British colony and is now best known for its hybridized culture of both the East and West. With a dynamic cityscape and people there enjoying vibrant lifestyles, Hong Kong also bears the fame of being a shopper's paradise. While 2020 is a hard year for any city in the world because of the global epidemic of COVID-19, Hong Kong is suffering to another degree due to its social movement that has started since mid-2019 and its political status still remains unclear due to its dual-identity as a post-colonial capitalist city and a “special administrative region” under the communist People Republic of China (PRC).

With Hong Kong's unique history, it has a profound complexity in its politics and a sense of insecurity of its very own identity. While the city has decided to carry on the legacy of focusing on economic growth after the decolonization, the city renders a cyberpunk image of homogeneous skyscrapers when it comes to the discussion of how the social and cultural context cultivate the built environment and the use of space.

Without any extra effort in urban planning and adequate attention in encouraging or enforcing the design of physical space beyond the minimum per building code from the government, the built environment has magnified the urban stress through the years. It is evident that Hong Kong lacks openness and urban lungs to resilient, and it also lacks incentive to build space that celebrates wellness and humanity on the policy level.

Hong Kong's super-high dense vertical living environment and its social inequality has already attracted attention in the psychology field. Under the same context, this

essay aims to address the cultural by-product the shopper's paradise has brought to the city, and how it spatially constructs a unique way of living that is deemed to be less holistic.

Heterotopia



(Figure 2: Drone shot of a shopping mall in the appearance of a cruise surrounded by private housing estate in Hong Kong, by an Australian photographer Junaid Hassan, 2019)

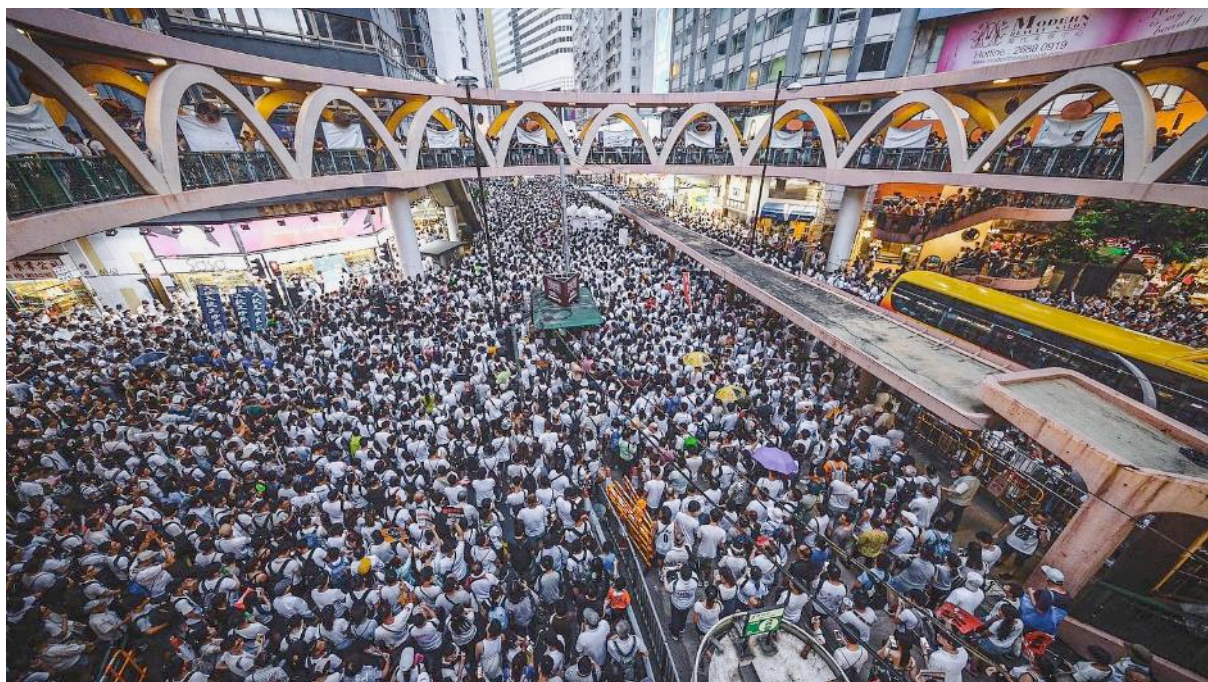
Despite the fact that exploitations exist in colonies (Foucault, 1986), Hong Kong has benefited economically, institutionally and somewhat spatially as a British outpost from its colonial years.

The British government imposed an outline zoning plan to put urban spaces in order and categorize neighbourhood and land use by function in the 1950s, followed by plans of building infrastructures such as tunnels, bridges and public housing in the following decades. The effort in structuring urban spaces to create an opportunity to build private housing can be shown in the above drone shot in Figure 2, which also included a unique appearance of a shopping mall that acts as amenities for the cluster of eighty-eight towers of residential high rise.

In contrast to the physical construction of space, the decolonization which is translated as “returning” to China developed a profound sense of social insecurity in

Hong Kong. Transitioning from auto-governance to allegiance and now to, arguably, a sovereign nation-state, the tension accumulates over time and has slowly transformed the psychological composition of HongKonger through environmental and social structures. Even though Hong Kong was known as “a borrowed space on borrowed time”, the discrepancy of attempting to align a Capitalist free market to Communist China seems to be a schizophrenic concept in nature (Choy, 2007). The use of “return” simplified the complexity of emotion and institutional hardship as it commercialized the city and its people as a commodity that could simply be “returned” after a certain duration of time. The conflict in executing “One-Country Two-Systems” is slowly becoming evident (Choy, 2007).

To “rectify” this, the Hong Kong government attempted to implement “Moral and National Education” to local school curriculum in 2010, in which “National” refers to China. If the protest activities for this proposal were understood as the first sign of resistance for being “returned” to China, The Umbrella Revolution in 2014 that made multiple international headlines could be interpreted as a society-wide objection. The occupation of public grounds and reclamation of civic space by massive street take-overs was a strong expression demanding for self-autonomy and freedom in response to such “recolonization” (Choy, 2007).



(Figure 3: Hong Kong Streetscape during the march for Hong Kong’s Anti Extradition Bill in June 2019, by Terrance Ho, 2019)

With the accumulation of unsettling emotion and continuous distrust towards the pro-China government in the past two decades, the Anti Extradition Bill protest started a year ago (in March 2019) has a record-high participation headcount of two million in one of the marching in June — the biggest “fight” in Hong Kong’s history. Though the bill itself was withdrawn in late 2019 due to strong opposition by HongKongers, the demand(s) has transformed from withdrawing the bill to inquiring for transparent investigations for the overuse of tear-gas and abuse of violence. Not that it only injured protestors, medical staffs, and media crew during incidents, people were also

being traumatised of using public space after the events. In addition to tearing the city in parts, the tension between government authorities and the general public has also gone worse over time, with escalated distrust towards the police force. With one in every three adults in Hong Kong reported syndrome of PTSD after the prolong social event in January 2020 (Ni MY et al., 2020), the question is no longer how can one overcome the fear of another person or party, but the fear of being in public space.

Junkspace

“If space-junk is the human debris that litters the universe, junk-space is the residue mankind leaves on the planet.” (Koolhaas, 2002) – Dutch Architect Rem Koolhaas’s critique on the design and production of modernized shopping malls is very applicable to cities like Hong Kong today.

This essay aims to provide a new perspective to see shopping malls as a by-product of Hong Kong’s development, in which people are already feeling fatigue from sites for consumerism, yet they could not avoid it. The four sub-sections will discuss the existence of shopping mall – which is widely referred as Junkspace (Koolhaas, 2002). From learning spaces through sense to interoperating space from scale, “*Façade Visuals*” and “*Bigness in Scale*” set the bases to discuss “*(Junk)Space and Discomfort*”. The ideas will then be carried into “*Stacking Spaces*”- a brief critique for a newly opened shopping mall in Hong Kong, K11 Musea.

Façade Visuals

The dual identity of Hong Kong and the complicated politics that it naturally inherits can be translated to a juxtaposed impression of the urbanscape that is also very unique – First, the discomfoting repetitiveness of densely populated façades that arrayed along the tower that are not permeable; then the out of scale mega “air-conditioned box” podium that is stack in between the ground and high rise which is impossible to avoid in daily life.



(Figure 4: Repetitiveness in residential building captured by international photographer Michael Wolf, from the collection “Architecture of Density”, 2009)

The disconnection with nature in urban environment is one of the reasons causing discomfort in the Hong Kong. Façade design is one of the elements that directly impact a citizen’s emotion and spiritual health as they are the direct interface one will encounter in everyday life. Dull and repetitive façade design are some everyday hard

realities that kills creativity and drains one out. (Ellard, 2019) Although these might be hard fascination that foreigners are curious to seek for, it might also only be a type of tourist attraction – Hong Kong was identified “a city of workers, not for citizens” (Ng & Hill, 2002) as early as two decades ago.

While the colonial legacy brought economic opportunity and financial value to the city, in contrast to becoming a global city that could set stage for international trade, it also planted a seed for becoming a cyberpunk as the city grew and expanded.

In 1975, large-scale development took off. The local government created the metro railway network via the Mass Transit Railway Corporation (MTRC). In addition, this company also functions as land developer. Hong Kong adapts “Comprehensive Development Area” (CDA) which stands for a planning control mechanism that streamlined large mixed-use Transit Orientated Development (TOD). While it might be slightly vague and deceiving, it can very well be translated and explained as “Mall-Orientated Complex” (Al, 2016).

While Macao, a small city that was colonized by the Portuguese, became the “Asian Las Vegas” that stresses on Family Orientated Development over the years. It is to brand and design destinations to create experience within structures to favour tourism that ultimately support its core business of gambling. In contrast, the development model of Hong Kong projects an impression of celebrating consumerism and materialistic living. This way of living was introduced by the British when Hong Kong was under colonization. As the government did not change the vision of development but aim to sustain the economic growth in an aggressive way, it did help Hong Kong in earning and maintaining the attractive brand of shopping paradise as envisioned. However, it also creates a built environment that puts strain on its population, both geographically and politically, and this is the cost of prioritising economic growth over other aspects.

On an institutional level, it recognises the centrality of the mall and the importance of integrating it with other elements of daily life. However, from a local perspective, “The built product of modernization is not modern architecture but junkspace.” (Koolhaas, 2002). It has slowly made the city inaccessible at certain extremes, especially when the developer maxes out the Gross Floor Area (GFA) by extruding the envelop of the mall from the buildable plot. As a result, from the width of walkway on the street to the distance of crossing, everything seemed to prioritise vehicles rather than pedestrians. It is almost that the newer the development is, the less walkable the area is.

Bigness in Scale



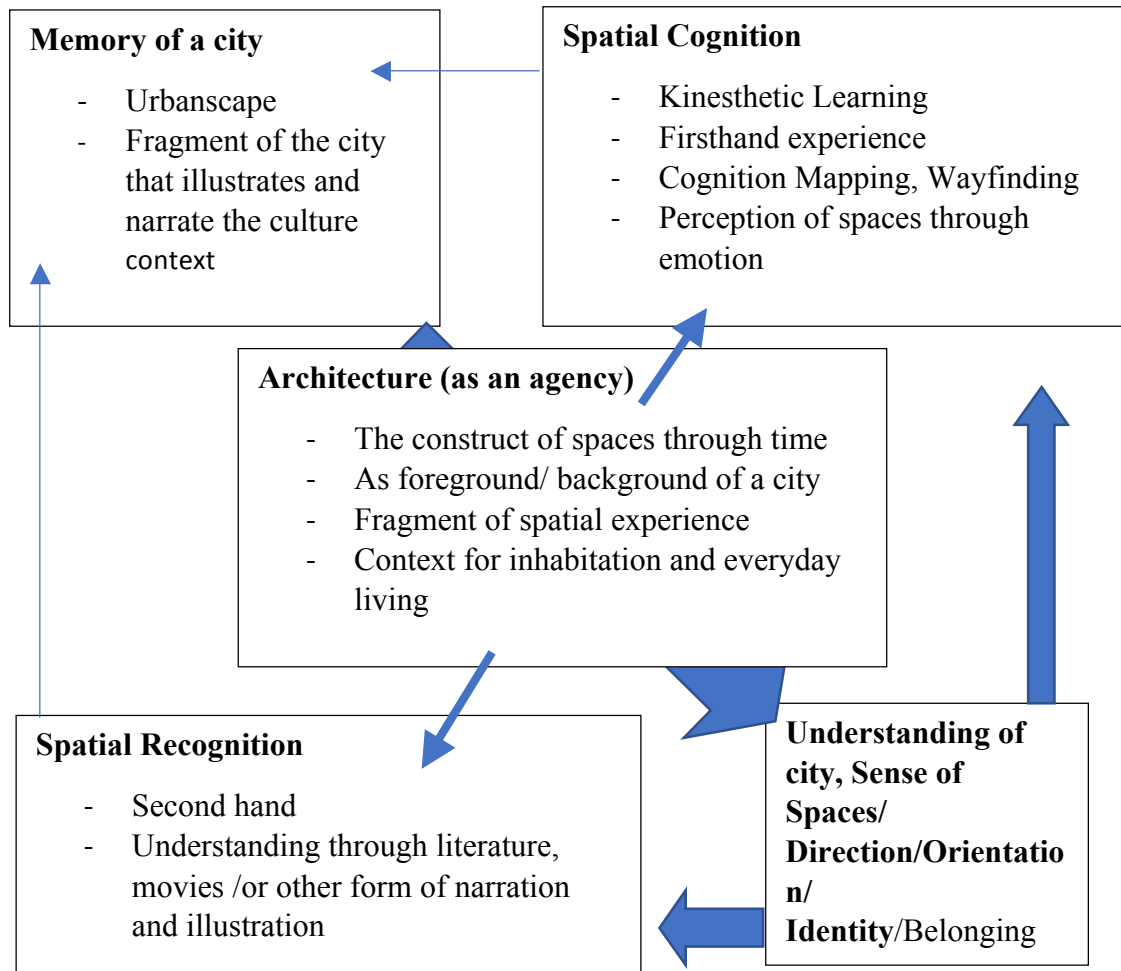
(Figure 5: Google Earth Rendering of the Union Square Development, Hong Kong, 2020)

Hong Kong's Union Square in West Kowloon is an iconic mega-structure project that has grown disproportionally out of scale. Its podium deck was played up as it is one without streets, blocks or buildings separated from each other (Al, 2016). This gigantic-scale project includes seven phases of development, comprising 18 residential towers, with 2 towers of office, hotel and service apartment mix-use, all built on a single podium mall that sits on top of the underground train station. The scale of development is almost as great as Canary Wharf in London, and such 35 acres represented a new concept of urban living, with a narration of "self-sufficient city within a city" (Al, 2016). This is a great example of how architecture design changes our way of living and the cognitive mapping of city space.

As all experience of space is a time-structured process, and all experience of time is a space-structured process (Nitschke, 1966), it is indeed scary to realize how the existence of shopping malls actually manipulate our everyday lifestyle by attempting to "normalize a culture of consumerism". Hong Kong's apartment could almost be described as micro. Therefore, the mall that is right below the apartment tower takes on the role of the public square and become the most convenient set to "play out [everyday life] on the its terrain" (Al, 2016). Especially when street-level appears to be less welcoming, or when summer becomes humid and hot – the shopping atrium, or privately owned public space, with plenty of space and free air-conditioning, becomes a default gathering place.

According to Stefan Al from the book "Mall City – Hong Kong's Dreamworlds of Consumption", "In this respect, Hong Kong's mall cities achieve the maximum potential of "Gruen Transfer", a term refers to the moment when the mall's undulating corridors lead them to simply shop for shopping's sake, rather than approaching shopping with a plan to buy a specific product." As shopping malls are stacked between everyday commutes between work and home, a large portion of the population is forced to get through commercialized zones, not by means of personal choice. In other words, "cities of production and consumption grow to reach the climax of modernism, leaving the inhabitants no chance of escape". (Al, 2016)

(Junk) Space and Discomfort



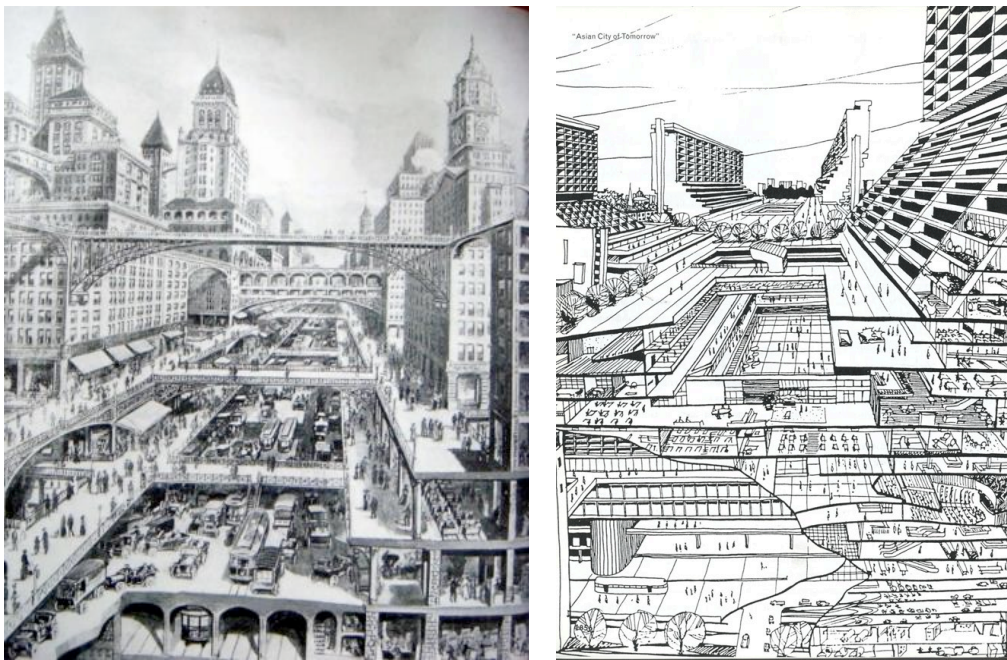
(Figure 6: Diagram to show the relationship of learning spatial experience.)

The physics equation of $s=d/t$ explains the relationship between speed, distance and time. While mass transit railway transfers bodies from one space to another at a fast pace in exchange of gaining the time through convenience, one loses the opportunity to perceive the physical distance through a biological means (Chan, 2020). Not to even mention, most of the journey takes place in an artificially constructed interior, which has no sense of orientation within the city or time through the day. Imagine if one is able to commute to work by simply going through a vertical journey of going underground from a tower (through a shopping mall), commute, and arriving underground of the workplace before escalating up through another mall's atrium – to what extent is this person able to learn the sense of space in the larger context in respect to the city?

For instance, the experience of a person leaving residential tower, and commute by bus, this person gets a sense of the contextual environment; throughout the journey, this person experiences the sense of distance and space (through time). Disorientation causes confusion, which blurs one's cognition mapping of a space. It might not necessarily cause the fading of memory of a place, but it certainly impacts the cognitive perception of spaces and sense of "being".

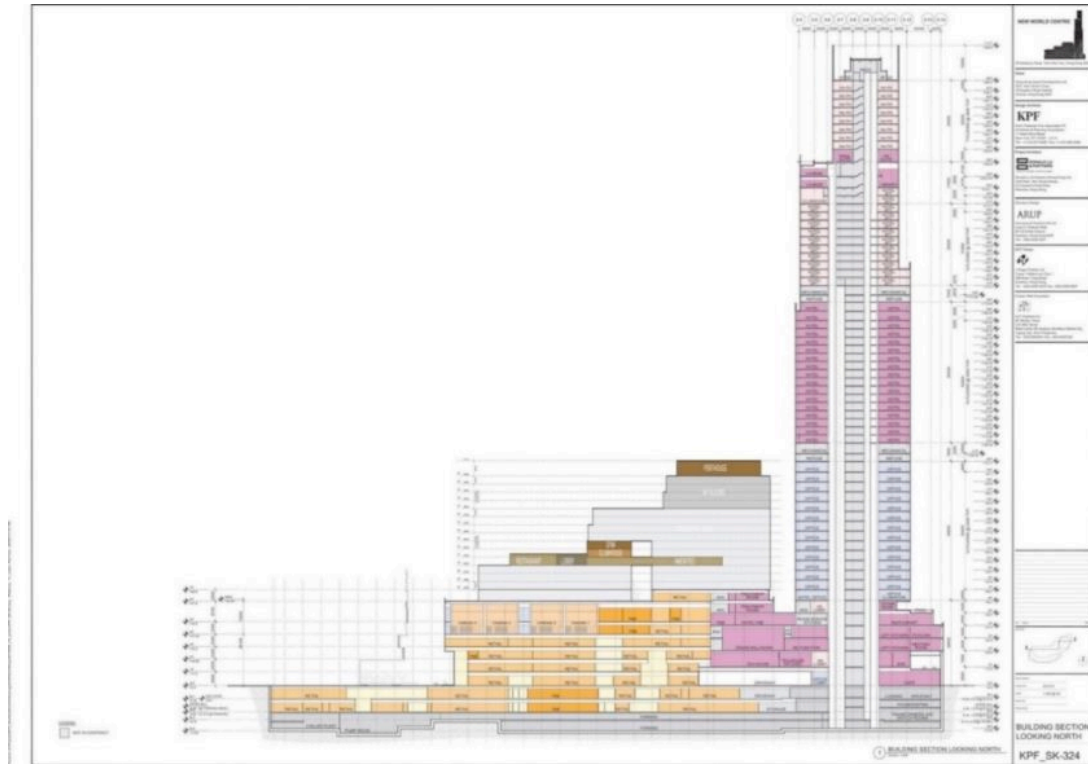
Since we construct the environment and the environment construct us, over relying on vertical mapping in daily routine will make one lack the ability to perceive a sense of distance. That is also perhaps a modern disability a proportion of Hong Kong's population share today. If Architecture can be understood as an agency for one to learn about spatial cognition and recognise a certain sense of familiarity, it built the memory of a city by fragments. This memory will become a background of the emotion and experience one associates with the structure and form (of Architecture), in which creates an understanding of the city that include a sense of orientation and identity.

Stacking Spaces



(Figure 7: The comparison of visions for future city (Corbett, 1931; Koolhaas, 1995))

From “City of Future” (left of Figure 7) by Harvey Wiley Corbett in 1931, to Rem Koolhaas’s vision on “Asian City of Tomorrow” (right of Figure 7) in 1995, these urbanists share a vision on a sectional complexity in an urban environment. While this concept of development with embedding multi-level of transportation flow is highly practiced in “mall-city” such as Hong Kong, its sense of space never feels proportional to its scale.



(Figure 8: Sectional diagram that shows the programming and space use of the complex. It capture the height of each levels and major openings of the design. With orange colour representing shopping mall spaces, pink highlighted area that is dedicated for hotel-use. In addition, light purple and light pink represents the office-space and service apartment floors. Architectural Record Drawing Document, 2019)

“According to the new gospel of ugliness, there is already more junksapce under construction in 21st century than survived from the 20th ...” (Koolhaas, 2002)- Hong Kong already has more than three-hundred malls, which can be understood as a “monopolised” infiltration of everyday life.

As recent as less than a year ago, Hong Kong has opened a new mall that sits in a prime location of the waterfront of Victoria Harbour. According to “K11 Musea” (2019), it describes itself as *“sparkling new global Cultural-Retail destination and aspires to enrich your daily life ...this world-class experiential landmark brings in immersive experiences in retail, art, culture, entertainment and gastronomy, all under one roof”*. It can be seen in the sectional diagram above (Figure 8), even though this shopping mall design (shown in orange) does not directly link to the mass transit railway system, it also falls into the typical typology of acting as deluxe amenities to the luxurious tower of mix-use.



(Figure 9: Exterior Photo of K11 Musea, over-looking the iconic Victoria Harbour, 2019)

“Continuity” is the essence of junkspace: *it exploits any invention that enable expansion, deploys the infrastructure of seamlessness: escalator, air conditioning...Junkspace is sealed, held together not by structure, but by skin, like a bubble.* (Koolhaas, 2002) This *junkspace*, K11 Musea, was opened eight months ago, and it is also the 12th shopping mall that resides in this area. Regurgitation is the new creativity; instead of creation, which we honour, cherish and embrace manipulation (Koolhaas, 2002). The “over-designed” and “over-branded” new mall, is very disappointing.

With great location on a prime site, the design could have been more generous in sharing the context with its user or showing more appreciation to it. Not only that this design did not show any interaction with the precious waterfront in front of it, the forceful act of directing street level circulation back into the *Junkspace* made it into another homogenous development, leaving pedestrian no chance to escape from commercialized areas.

The impermeable façade, again, solidify the street level visual towards this mega-structure. The “bigness” of it magnifies the distance between the core and envelop that increased to the façade can no longer reveal what is happening inside. The connection between interior and exterior were cut off and *the humanist expectation of “honesty” is lost* (Koolhaas, 1995). The super-high ceiling on the ground level that was revealed from the storefront also create an exceptionally out of human scale feeling. In short, *Junksapce thrives on design, but designs die in junkspace* (Koolhaas, 2002).



(Figure 10: Interior Photo of K11 Musea featuring its iconic ceiling, 2019)

The extreme disconnection between the exterior and interior design creates a sense of discomfort when one looks up to its iconic futuristic interior atrium. The over-articulated ceiling, choice of colour palette, interior use of material, preference of lighting design is not cohesive at all and if anything, they have made it more awkward. If Architecture is about creating an environment of comfort for euphoria, this interior design overall causes schizophrenia. Although there might be great design incentives to start with, or some thoughtful intellectual elements in the process of design, *“all materialization is provisional: cutting, bending, tearing, coating: construction has acquired a new softness, like tailoring...The joint is no longer a problem, an intellectual issue: transitional moments are defined by stapling and taping, wrinkly brown bands...”* (Koolhaas, 2001) – K11 Musea’s dimmed interior clearly set it aside to its competitor, but in weird way that translated the cyberpunk of high-tech yet low life to reality. With a lot of marketing effort that stressed on the unique shopping experience with the enhancement of art and culture, even the design was highly praised by some local, is it only a *“potential utopia clogged by its users”* (Koolhaas, 2001).

Re-learning Architecture

The importance of Architecture that cultivates a city is under-recognized by government in Hong Kong. It might as well be underappreciated, as there were no

effort in conservation until the recent decade. From the amount of resources used in promoting and educating the citizens in architecture from a cultural perspective, it reflects a weak government in envisioning this city's future. When top-down approach did not work in this situation, it requires the real estate market and design professional to take a more proactive role. If the market desire higher quality spaces, there will be new design needs requested by real estate developer. This will open up new opportunities for architects to react to the problem with a more proactive role to improve a city through design. In simple words, spaces of quality are luxurious goods in Hong Kong. Only if the market force were pushed to real estate developer, it is hard to depend on the building design and construction industry to create new way of living.

Redefine Efficiency

What does efficiency really means when people are cramped in micro units that barely fulfil the basic requirement of having adequate daylight and natural ventilation? Although it is quite impressive to house 7.4 million people on limited buildable land in Hong Kong, the urban typology only reflects its "efficient" way of living by quantitative numbers. Living in a densely populated city does not necessarily means livable.

Using a workplace design as example, the design approach can drastically change the result. Efficiency could be define as "this floor plate size can fit 250 work stations, therefore the design can accommodate 250 employees working in their cubicle"; while efficiency could also be understand as "this floor plate design can fit 120 employee, in which it provide a harmonious environment for them to excel their the maximum potential at work". If space design is to favor people, the measures has to be human-centered as well.

Architecture in Hong Kong is practical. "Efficiency" is not only a priority, but desire, or even benchmark of measuring the end goal of a development. If Architecture could be understood in a more romantic manner, the quality of space would be the most important out of everything. If only Architecture could be understood as giving medicine to a sick body, it could also be a solution to improve city space by fragments – HongKongers are very much capable of reinventing themselves in a positive way. To make this analogy work in a practical city like Hong Kong, it needs a strong market force with the incentive from the government to justify the paradigm shift.

Government Intervention

Architecture itself is a very powerful tool of invention for everyday experience, but the high land price, developer-driven market in Hong Kong has almost distort the understanding and education of the art of Architecture. With countless shopping mall in Hong Kong, they become sites to support economic growth and attract tourism. It played a role in maintaining Hong Kong's economic growth and status of a world city for the last two decades. However, the mall-orientated development model has also "chronically killed" the city by providing space of consumption that is not something its people need.

In contrast, some other Asian cities like Singapore, had great incentive in the promotion of green building. The proactive approach in creating incentive on a policy level, has allow new spaces to excel their biggest potential in healing the sick urbanscape. While Singapore's new addition to the Jewel Changi Airport could also be described as having a jungle within the airport, it managed to re-introduce nature to the urban environment, and put it at high priority. The implementation of soft fascination of nature, plays an essential role as site to release urban tension. As there are sites to slow down and de-stress, adding a touch of human sense to the environment and make it more livable.



(Figure 11: Iconic atrium within the new addition of Jewel Changi Airport in Singapore. It is a mixed-use development by architect Moshie Safdie including gardens, a hotel, aviation facilities, a shopping mall and a 40 meter indoor waterfall – current the world's largest. Photographed by John Seton Callahan, Getty Images, 2019)

It is not the past projections of the future that governs the potential of a city, but the extent of a government's desire in making it a more human-centered place. Hong Kong lack great policy that governs building design and construction, as the government had not been proactive enough in solving problems through space design. Perhaps the city must design and expand in reference to the Mass Transit Railway network, but would there be any chance that what we get on top of the mass transit is no longer a deck of shopping mall that has impermeable façade? Could there be some accessible real “public space” and “open space” in this respect?

Towards Resilience

This essay unpacked how the real estate development trend eventually turn Hong Kong to be a mall city and reflected on how they now become “Junkspace”: The materialistic way of living under modernization that created a distorted need for the production of the construction of shopping malls. “*Façade Visuals*” and “*Bigness in Scale*” discussed a design culture that is unique to Hong Kong. “*(Junk)Space and*

Discomfort” attempt to address the inter-related element of emotion, feelings and space, that suggest potential affects “*Stacking Spaces*” have to our daily life.

Shopping malls in Hong Kong are owned by real estate developer while public space should be publicly owned. This is an obvious by-product of mall-orientated development, which suggests that the root of the problem could be the way of development – even if it happened through private-public partnership or joint-ventures. The sense of heterotopia in “privately owned public space” is very strong due to the sense of surveillance. When private developer has their own set of regulations, the level of restriction on top of a “public space” is high enough to deem it no longer “public” in a physical sense.

On the industrial level, the building design and construction industry should also reflect the need of incorporating other professions in the process of building design and construction. For instance, “Sustainable design”, “Green building”, “energy efficiency”, “net-zero” are concepts around how a building perform instead of how can built environment encourage people for healthier choices and social behaviors. How is a building being managed that restrict or inform behavior is also a topic within the scope that worth to explore. This is not something geographically unique to Hong Kong but a new sandbox that all cities should try to explore.

Conclusion

Under the backdrop of social unrest cause by COVID-19 on top of the unsettling emotion from the prolong protest from last year, the concepts in Hong Kong’s future urban planning and design must need to change. Today’s Hong Kong is in urgent need for developments to push back, and more importantly the government should set an explicit framework to lead the industry to create a future city that is both healthier and more holistic. With all these questions about the future design of Hong Kong, this city is still full of potential to explore that opens up great opportunity to experiment with a more innovative, yet humane ways of city living.

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