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Public Space Trends in Hong Kong. A view from the New Territories

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Abstract
Hong Kong's vertical urban landscape, bustling street markets, and multi-layered urban spaces have attracted a range of scholars (Cuthbert and McKinnell, 1997; Smith, 2005; Frampton [et al.], 2010; Shelton [et al.], 2011). Therefore, this paper focuses on aspects of Hong Kong's public spaces[1], which so far have caught less attention, but affect the majority of its residents today. The paper starts with the following observations: (1) More than half of Hong Kong's population (52,2%) lives today in the New Territories, an area usually outside of international attention (Census 2011)[2]; (2) Here, most people live in public and private housing estates, constructed over the last 40 years; (3) Individual estates can reach a population size of entire European towns and their "public spaces" – if one can name them as such – follow strict rules and have their own spatial conditions; (4) The street patterns, which connect these estates with their surrounding are fundamentally different from those of the older urban areas on Hong Kong Island and the Kowloon Peninsula. Basically, in these new developments we don't find the bustling street markets or the complex multi-layered spatial conditions anymore, which have caught most international attention (e.g. Frampton [et al.], 2010); and, (5) through urban renewal and redevelopment these new spatial conditions are introduced also to the older urban areas. As a response, there have been a growing number of initiatives by civil society groups to recapture the original role of streets as public spaces to offer more opportunities for economic and social activities, and re-enable expressions different cultural identities, life styles, and political views[3].

Keywords: Public Space; Hong Kong; Streets; New Territories.

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Background

In 2013 UN-Habitat published the report *Streets as Public Spaces and Drivers of Urban Prosperity,* in which Hong Kong ranked highest among all studied cities in Africa, Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean, in regards to the amount of *land allocated to streets* and *density of street intersections* (UN Habitat, 2013, 72 & 77). In the preface of the report, Joan Clos, Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director of UN-Habitat, highlighted the fundamental importance of street patterns for five dimensions of prosperity: *Productivity, infrastructure development, environmental sustainability, quality of life, and equity/social inclusion* (UN-Habitat, 2013, IV). The exceptional high ranking of Hong Kong's core areas, seems to be supported by other data regarding its economic performance[4], and by the urban experience of bustling street spaces, short walking distances and numerous businesses and activities in the older urban areas on Hong Kong Island and Kowloon Peninsula.

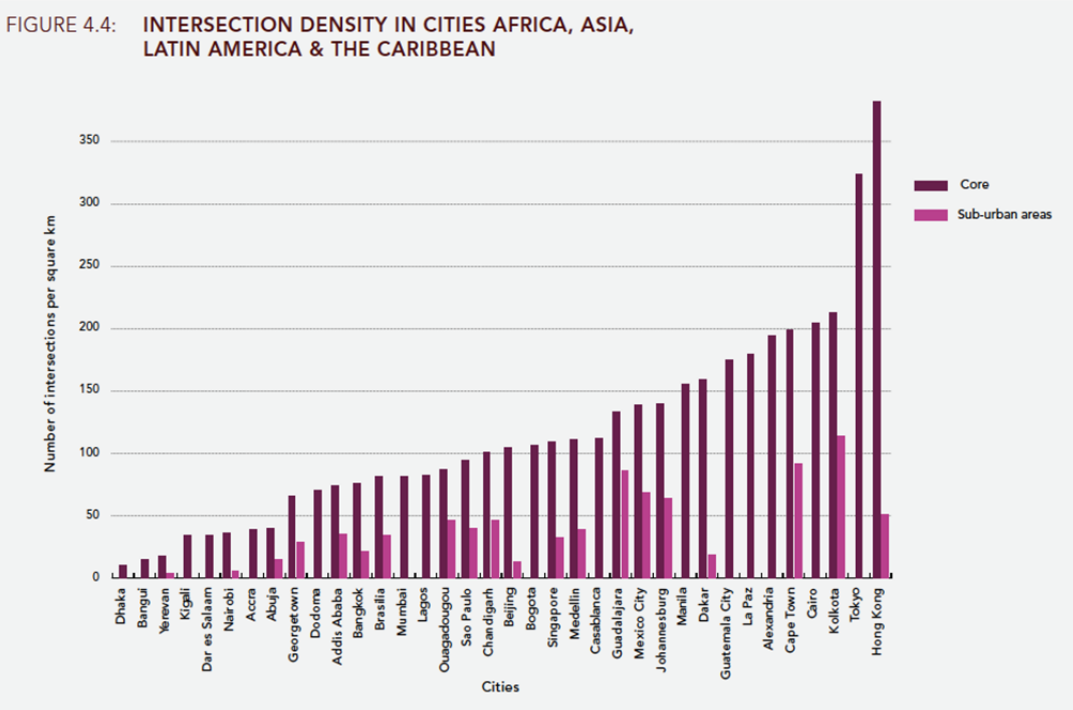

Fig. 1. Intersection Density in Cities Africa, Asia, Latin America & The Caribbean (UN Habitat, 2013, 77).

However, the UN-Habitat report presents also another remarkable result: The great gap between the data for Hong Kong's *core* and *suburban* areas. Here in suburbia, Hong Kong's results are among the lowest. For instance, its intersection density compares with those of the suburban areas of Brasilia and Johannesburg (UN-Habitat, 2013, 72), places usually discussed for their lack of vibrancy (Brasilia) and high level of social inequality (Johannesburg). The report doesn't specify the location and boundaries of the core and suburban areas used for the calculations. Also, the study doesn't consider the impact of rail-based public transport and population density on urban prosperity, which could present Hong Kong's suburban areas in a better light. But, as this paper aims to show, there exist fundamental differences between the street patterns of the older urban areas

on Hong Kong Island and Kowloon and those in the New Territories, and they should be addressed seriously for their range of effects[5].

Until World War II, most people in the British colony lived on Hong Kong Island and in Kowloon. The *New* Territories became part of the colony only in 1898, when they were leased from China. Their urbanization started only after World War II, with the arrival of many refugees and migrants from China.

In the older urban areas, streets were laid-out between 1842 and the 1930s and were organized as small grids and street blocks. Size and orientation of the grids was based on the movements of pedestrians and horse- and streetcars, as well as the trading activities around the harbor. At that time, streets were the centers of everyday life and accommodated a range of additional functions such as street markets and eateries, informal extensions of shops and workshops, occasional theatre performances and religious rituals. The shop-tenement houses built along the streets offered flexible spaces for living and working. Their ground floor spaces were opened to the sidewalks to attract customers, and, sidewalks were covered to protect pedestrians from too much sun and rain (Tieben, 2013). In Central and Admiralty, there existed a small number of purpose-designed public spaces for the representation of the colonial government and the social elites; and after the outbreak of the bubonic plague (1893) several open spaces were added, to improve people's health; but, the street spaces kept their role as centers of everyday life[6].

When urbanization of the New Territories started in the 1960s, streets were laid-out here according to the new paradigm of separating pedestrian and vehicular traffic in anticipation of increasing road traffic. According to the modernist idea of functional zoning, areas were demarcated as "residential" and assigned for the development of public and private housing estates.

The following paragraphs discuss the public spaces of these public and private estates as well as their integration into the larger spatial plans of the New Towns in the New Territories. The paper concludes with preliminary conclusions and arising questions for the urban design and planning of Hong Kong and those cities, which consider Hong Kong as a potential urban model.

Public Spaces in Public Housing Estates

In 2006, 48.8 percent of Hong Kong's population lived in rental and subsidized-sale units of public housing estates, provided by the *Hong Kong Housing Authority* and *Hong Kong Housing Society*. With the massive construction of public housing, the colonial government responded to the high numbers of migrants from China (after World War II approximately one million per decade) and to the fast growing informal settlements. The first resettlement estate was built in 1954, accommodating the residents of the Shek Kip Mei squatter settlement, which had become homeless after a fire in 1953 (Castells, 1990). In 1973, the colonial government launched a comprehensive new town program and thus started the large-scale urbanization of the New Territories (Bristow, 1989).

The layout of the public housing estates made use of the architectural types prefigured by European modernism in the 1920-30s and the new planning paradigms of the 1960s, calling for the separation of pedestrians and road traffic (Buchanan, 2015). With average housing units not bigger than 13.1sqm per person (Public Housing Authority, 2015), the public spaces of the estates are important extensions of the individual living space and as

places to socialize with neighbors. Aware of the important role of these spaces, the *Housing Authority* and *Housing Society* put a significant effort into their design. For instance, in the public rental estate *Upper Ngau Tau Kok* (opened in 2001), residents can reach from their homes all public spaces and transport nods with universal access and protected from the weather. The placement of buildings ("Harmony I" and "Non-Standard" tower types) and open spaces followed the digital simulation of the microclimate, to capture natural ventilation and provide shading where needed. Plants and trees were added to further improve the environment; and seating and playgrounds were arranged according to inputs of residents in a seven years-long participation process. Furthermore, design details and artworks were added to evoke memories of the earlier – now redeveloped – estate and to strengthen residents' sense of belonging (Image 2).
The high quality of the public spaces in the *Upper Ngau Tau Kok Estate* resulted from the joint effort of professionals and academics and the input of residents. While not all public spaces in the public housing estates reach this quality, the general use of an interdisciplinary and participatory approach is helping to create more integrated solutions, considering *accessibility, activities, comfort,* and *sociability* at the same time[7].

Fig. 2. Public space at *Upper Ngau Tau Kok Estate*. Photo: H. Tieben.

However, despite these efforts and achievements, the public space design of these estates has important limitations: (1) Due to the limited repertoire of building typologies and open spaces, as well as limited ground floor activities and strict management rules, opportunities for self-organized economic and creative activities are strongly restricted (Tieben [et al.], 2013); (2) The main attention in the design is given to the spaces *within* the estates, while the *outer* perimeter is defined by blank walls and fences; (3) Streets surrounding the estates are planned for vehicles, which surprises, as over 90% of daily trips in Hong Kong are made by public transport (Hong Kong Government's Travel Characteristics Survey) and most residents of public housing estates don't own a car[8]. Due to the general lack of active street spaces, the one half of Hong Kong's population, which is living in public housing estates, has almost no opportunity to develop entrepreneurial skills or create own employment in the area where they live (Tieben [et al.] 2013). And, as today an increasing number of people is only temporarily or self-

employed, it is particular problematic if creating and sustaining a network to other businesses and clients is made so difficult. With the lack of street spaces also the opportunities to express and experience different cultural identities, lifestyles or political views are strongly restricted, affecting particularly young people and migrants who are still in the process of finding their own place in society.

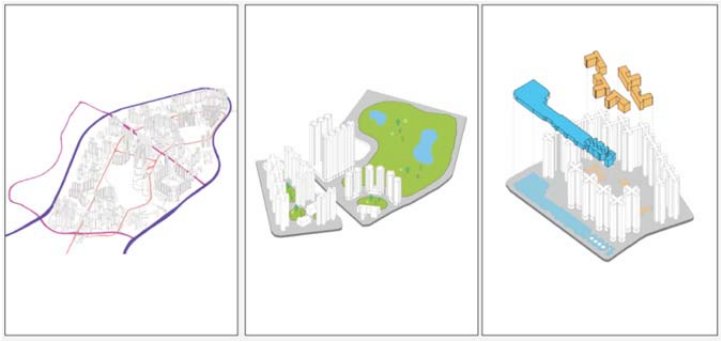

Fig. 3. On the left: road-spaces in the center of Tin Shui Wai, New Territories. Photo: H. Tieben.
Fig. 4. On the right: organization of Tin Shui Wai New Town.

While each public housing estate usually has its own commercial center, these do not provide such opportunities. Before the millennium, the *Hong Kong Housing Authority* had been responsible for these centers. At that time, some of them still offered a small number of shops and restaurants with direct street access (e.g. see *Chevalier Garden*). Other estates, such as the *Heng On Estate*, offered carefully designed transition zones between commercial areas and gathering spaces, which linked economic activities and social interaction.
In 2004, these commercial centers were privatized and now are owned and managed by *Link REIT*. Since then, there has been growing criticism regarding the increase of rents and the replacement of local shops by chain stores. There also were conflicts involving hawkers, who responded to the new difficulties with the management, by offering goods outside of the malls.
In addition to these controversies, there are spatial issues, related to the new inward looking mall design. A fundamental problem for new business ideas or businesses related to ethnic minorities is, that they face difficulties to expand their customer base and thrive within these small malls. Why should residents from neighboring estates come here? They would need to pass along long footbridges over vehicular roads, just to arrive in shopping malls, which offer the same small assortment shops as the mall in their own estate. While small businesses thus struggle to survive in the mall, their presence is missing along the monotonous vehicular roads, to make them more vibrant.

Public Spaces in Private Housing Estates
The other residents of the New Territories, who do not live in the public housing estates, most likely live in private estates.

While today's private estates tend to be gated, this has not always been this way in Hong Kong. For instance, Mei Foo Sun Chuen Estate, built between 1968 and 78 in New Kowloon, was well integrated into its surrounding and accessible to the general public. It was organized along a central street space for pedestrian, with shops and restaurants on two levels and a green central spine with resting and play areas. However, such solutions are no more built today.

The new gated communities, however, provide a wide range of in- and outdoor spaces, which remind on the amenities of luxurious holiday resorts. To those who can afford to live here, they offer spas and swimming pools, children playgrounds and study areas, as well as music rooms and event spaces. These amenities make the living in Hong Kong's increasingly dense urban environment more acceptable. They also provide a range of opportunities to socialize - although only with the residents of the same estate.

Similar to the public estates, also the private estates can reach very large scales. Already Mei Foo Sun Chuen Estate covered an area of 161,874 sqm for around 70,000–80,000 inhabitants. The recently built private estate, LOHAS Park occupies 330,000 sqm and in it's final state will have 21,500 apartments in fifty towers for around 58,000 residents. LOHAS Park is developed by the MTR Corporation in collaboration with Hong Kong's biggest real-estate developers and arranged on-and-around a train depot of the metro-line. The name LOHAS Park stands for "Lifestyle of Health and Sustainability" and encourages the use of public transport and reduction of fossil energy consumption. The marketing of the housing and commercial units recaptures the costs for the public infrastructure construction. However, such new models of private housing estates present similar problems to the public housing estates:

Despite their generally excellent connections to the public transport system and thus to other parts of Hong Kong, they remain often cut-off from their direct surrounding. Also here we find by walls and fences followed by wide vehicular roads. If retail spaces are provided, they are usually organized in shopping malls without direct access of stores to a public street. Businesses here have to follow the strict management rules of the developers and pay high rents for their vicinity to the metro-station. This system favor well-established brands and super market chains, while other businesses and services have difficulties to pay the rents or simply are excluded here. In addition, they also cannot move in the adjacent towers, as they are exclusively planned for housing.

Similar to New York, there exists in Hong Kong a bonus system, granting developers higher plot-ratios for the provision of public spaces within their developments. Over the last two decades this bonus system has been criticized, regarding the accessibility, design, legal status, and permitted uses of the spaces it produced (Rossini, 2014). In addition there were concerns regarding the lack of transparency how much bonus space would be granted (Cuthbert and McKinnell, 1997). As a response, in 2011, Hong Kong SAR Government published the *Public Open Space in Private Development Design and Management Guideline* (Hong Kong SAR Development Bureau, 2011). It is still too early to evaluate its long-term effect. Currently, still hurdles have to overcome to make these *public spaces in private developments* more attractive. The application processes to provide outdoor seating for cafes and restaurants or organize events are seen as complicated, time consuming and costly and such initiatives face resistance of residents in the estates (Yeung, 2015).

Road-scapes of the New Territories

The above-discussed public and private housing estates are the essential components for urban development in the New Territories today. After the discussion of the public spaces within the estates, the following question is: How are these internal public spaces estates connected with the surrounding street pattern? This question brings us back to the remarkable contrast between the street patterns of Hong Kong *core* and *suburban* areas, presented in the UN-Habitat study (UN-Habitat, 2013).

One of the most striking cases in this regard was the planning of Tin Shui Wai New Town since the 1980s. This new town for around 300,000 people is based on the above-discussed functional units of public and private housing estates, shopping malls, etc. As each of the estates was designed as an inward-looking unit, the entire new town has basically only roads and no streets. Residents in Tin Shui Wai are faced with serious problems to find jobs and usually have to make a one-hour travel to work in the older urban areas. The lack of street spaces and flexible building typologies means, that it is almost impossible in the entire 300,000 people town to find a place to open a simple bicycle or car repair shop, carpentries or a new 3d-printing shop. There are also no spaces for law or architecture offices, as well as for restaurants or grocery shop, which would allow recent migrants to create their own jobs and become part of the local society.

As mentioned above, the most recent developments, such as *LOHAS Park,* can assume large sizes of 330,000sqm. The entire area is organized without any public street. There increasingly large developments with few or no streets are linked to the economic logic of land development in Hong Kong. Since its early days, Hong Kong's government relied on private investors for the construction of large public infrastructure and land reclamations projects. Developments such as *LOHAS Park* without public streets are more profitable the government and the private developers. The government saves its expenditures for the construction, maintenance and policing of streets and shifts them to the developer. For the private developer, fewer or no streets mean a larger undivided piece of land with significantly higher development density, as the permitted plot ratio increases proportionally with the land size. This, in return, brings also proportionally higher government revenue for the land lease. As a side effect, the surrounding roads become wider, according to the calculated higher road traffic; and, the wider roads have to comply with higher safety standards, further enforcing the separation of pedestrians and cars.

Such tendencies are neither new, nor only specific to Hong Kong. Much more important is the question: Which efforts are made to counter such tendencies to create a more socially and spatially integrated city. In the 1970s when the Sha Tin New Town was planned, the colonial government formulated the specific ambition to create a socially balanced and self-sufficient New Town (Bristow, 1989). This effort followed the destabilizing experience of the 1967 *Hong Kong Riots* and the international political climate of the time. The main step to realize this ambitious goal was to link all individual developments of Sha Tin New Town with an intricate public space network, which was conceived across different scales and dimensions. The network was anchored at the railway and bus stations and extended from here through a central shopping mall to the waterfront of the Shing Mun River, where a concert hall, outdoor arena, a park and a museum were placed. The main pedestrian path through the mall leads over a highway

and local streets, and is then extending into a system of elevated walkways and outdoor spaces to both sides, integrating different private and public housing estates.
The grain of the street network remained small and was combined with an additional multilevel pedestrian system. Urban design guidelines were inscribed in the lease documents and helped to realize these multilevel pedestrian connections despite the involvement of many different public authorities and private developers (Bristow, 1989). Following the design guidelines, also building heights were stepped down towards the river space and views protected to the surrounding hills with a Christian monastery and Buddhist temple. Along the waterfront, also a cycling track was provided.
Besides the central shopping mall for international brands, which became the "High Street" of the new town, further malls and markets were added, offering a broader range of shop sizes to more affordable rents. The facades of these malls were opened to the streets and the pedestrian walkways. In the public housing estates, places for Dai Pa Dongs (local street eateries) were provided as social gathering points, which with their vibrant atmosphere not only attract residents from the public housing estates. Most importantly, public and private housing estates were treated with equal care as essential parts of an integrated spatial and social fabric. The essential strategy for integration was the carefully designed and programmed public spaces network. Similar spatially and socially inclusive approaches are missing today. Thus, based on the underlying logic of land development and the types of current urban models, Hong Kong urban and social fabric becomes increasingly fragmented.

Preliminary Conclusions

The UN-Habitat study *Streets as Public Spaces and Drivers of Urban Prosperity* underlined the central relevance of street patterns in regards to *productivity, infrastructure development, environmental sustainability, quality of life, and equity/social inclusion*. In this study the old core areas of Hong Kong ranked highest in terms of the amount of land allocated to streets and density of street intersections. However, the results for Hong Kong's suburban areas were very low.
The difficulties for more integrative street patters in the New Territories started with the division of urban life in distinct functions and building types for public and private housing estates, shopping malls etc. Their connection was then entrusted mainly rail-based mass-transit and buses using large vehicular roads. With these decisions, Hong Kong abandoned the backbone of its earlier prosperity and socio-spatial integration: Its vibrant and interconnected street spaces. Which results in an increasingly fragmented urban fabric, with substantial lack of opportunities for small and innovative businesses, and the expression of different cultural identities, life styles and political views.
But, the example of Mei Foo and Sha Tin showed, that under similar political and economic conditions, much better integrated solutions could be produced. These solutions didn't copy simply the traditional street spaces of the older urban areas of Hong Kong, but used contemporary urban typologies and planning approaches, to create well-connected and vibrant public spaces on multiple levels. In the case of Sha Tin, the public space network linked public transport hubs with public and private housing, besides providing commercial areas ranging from "high-street" shopping and to street eateries. This example could be a positive lesson for Hong Kong's current *New Development Areas* planned in the New Territories.

At the same time, the results of the UN-Habitat study should be a warning that current tendencies in Hong Kong are going in the opposite direction and that recent urban renewal projects might destroy exactly those street spaces, which so far were the backbone for a broader shared prosperity and social inclusion[9].

Notes

(1) The term "public space" has its limitations in regards to the here-discussed examples. A recent publication proposes the term "urban space" to capture the hybridity of the contemporary spaces in Asian high-density cities (Cho [et al.], 2016). However, recent protest movements in Hong Kong and Taipei reiterated the relevance of the original concept of *public space* as the place to negotiate different political views. This aspect had been the most essential achievement of the Greek *agora*, and the Greek idea of the *polis*. To acknowledge this important aspect as a central demand in the current movements, the paper continues to use the term "public space", while acknowledging its recent critique.

(2) The development of Hong Kong under the British Colony Government started 1842 on Hong Kong Island after the first Opium War. After the second Opium War, the Kowloon Peninsula became part of the Colony. In 1898, The British Government leased the "New Territories" from the China. From 7.072,000 million people living in 2011 in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, only 1.270,876 lived on Hong Kong Island, 2,019,533 million in Kowloon, but 3,691,093 people (52.2%) in the New Territories (Census2011.gov.hk).

(3) Such groups are for instance: *Civic Exchange, Clean Air, Designing Hong Kong, Hong Kong Public Space Initiative, Very Hong Kong*. These issues are also addressed by the author's project *Magic Carpet – Re-envisioning Community Space* (magiccarpet.hk).

(4) Hong Kong also performs very high in other data related to prosperity, for instance the ease of doing business measured by the World Bank (worldwide rank 5, www.doingbusiness.org/rankings) and its economic freedom measured by the Heritage Foundation (worldwide rank 1, www.heritage.org/index/). However, the author is not aware of any study, which would have related these aspects.

(5) The *Census and Statistics Department* of Hong Kong SAR Government uses the boundaries of these historically and geographically distinct areas to organize its data. Therefore they are also used for this paper.

(6) A counter example is *Centre Street* in Sai Ying Pun (Hong Kong Island), which lost this role after the removal the street market on this street (Tieben, Baniassad, Govada, & Grace, 2014).

(7) For the discussion of the public spaces, the author uses the criteria *accessibility, activities, comfort* and *sociability*, established by the *Project for Public Space* (http://www.pps.org) as they allow a more holistic understanding.

(8) According to the *Public Housing Recurrent Survey 2008*, there were only around 154000 car users in public housing, comprising some 80 300 in PRH, 19 600 in TPS estates and 54 200 in HOS flats. Many of the used cars are company cars (for instance Taxi's). Only around 58 000 are using the car parking facilities in the estates.

(9) Hong Kong regularly figures as one of the most expensive cities in the world. For instance the 2016 survey by Mercer ranked Hong Kong as the most expensive city for expatriates. http://www.mercer.com/newsroom/continued-demand-for-mobility-in-the-global-workforce-challenged-by-cost-of-expatriate-packages.html

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