

# 9

## CHASING AMBIGUOUS CONDITIONS OF COEXISTENCE

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### Introduction

Only after a second glance do you realize that things aren't quite what you expected them to be. Lift interiors in Hong Kong, specifically domestic lifts, appear to be the same as most other lift interiors around the world. Possibly the decor is richer in ornament than an equivalent European lift, but the 1.5 meter-square ubiquitous cabin is a standardized component that simply gets installed and allowed to operate following programmed algorithms. In fact, your cognitive faculties cease to function in these commonly recognized "background" spaces. It is as if your brain goes into default mode, basing conclusions on preconceived assumptions about what is staring straight at you. On closer inspection, you realize that what you thought to be "standard" has been subtly manipulated: the lift buttons marking the floors of the apartment have been tampered as to omit any presence of the number 4 (4, 14, 24, 34. . .) due to its negative local "bad omen" connotations. Pronounced in Cantonese the word "four" phonetically sounds the same as "death," resulting in a paradoxical Spike Jonze situation where a building has no 4th, 14th, 24th floor, etc.<sup>1</sup>

Such a small, in most people's eyes inconspicuous, alteration embodies the notion of "Hong Kong Conditions." The conditional city is, in many ways, a reaction to the anaesthetized and anonymous city architects and urban planners so often pay attention to. Conditions in this context belong to the background city we inhabit, but are unable to acknowledge. The city we live in, yet fail to observe, collectively dismissed and marginalized by experts who, in their unyielding attempt to improve our habitat, seem to have lost the ability to appreciate the banal and quotidian urban

presence. You will never find an architect who claims authorship of the background city; shame and indignation prevail. By definition, the urban “background” is an orphan and circumstantial soul that at best can be described as an illegitimate urban byproduct only acknowledged via its antonym, the foreground city.

Contrary to the foreground city (the city of icons and architectural statements we are so often told constitutes its identity, from the Eiffel Tower in Paris to the Guggenheim in Bilbao), the background city is preoccupied with coexisting, adapting, and avoiding all manifestations of its ego. In short, the background city insists on being invisible. For better or worse, the present reality of cities, the “here and now” of our urban existence, is actually shaped by that 99% we refuse to discuss. Rather than dismiss such pervasive urban agglomerations, this chapter seeks to observe and interrogate the mechanisms and tropes of this non-city.

Just as one can never recall the sound of background noise, the background city cannot be reproduced, only recognized. Yet within this infinite sea of homogeneous scenarios, behind the scenes, back-stage, lie countless moments of inhabitation, existences that can only be brought into focus manually, by sheer determination. In a manner similar to tuning a radio, one has to tune in to the right city wavelength to be able to absorb and appreciate its intimate world of micro inhabitation, the invisible latent energy that makes every background scene distinct. We are no longer following a flat and generic urban landscape, but have entered a parallel actual world that anthropologists define as the cultural identity of a place (Mathews 2013).

## **Inhabited Urban Conditions from an Architectural Perspective**

At the core of what defines an urban condition is the notion of how we inhabit space. These two words “inhabit” and “space” require constant adapting and re-adapting to become an urban condition, for example the physical mutation of spaces to accommodate human existence, participation, and engagement. Conditions do not follow predetermined or preconceived ideals of spatial inhabitation, rather they reflect a constantly adapting space, a space that is arranged in association with time and behavior.

Conditions are grounded in “the local mind,” an argument advocated by the Italian anthropologist Franco La Cecla in his book *Mente locale* (1993), where he argues that the relationship between the inhabitant and the environment are not regulated by “spatial experts” such as architects, politicians, and administrators, but by local people.<sup>2</sup> Conditions, according to La Cecla, represent the anti-ubiquitous places of the city,

the city formed by the people who manipulate their surroundings via established “spatial structures,” to borrow the term coined by Claude Lévi-Strauss.<sup>3</sup> In this context, the urban conditions refer to shared spatial practices that embody the memory of a culture and define the social traditions of the place, including how it adapts to new necessities, by digesting or cannibalizing urban codes and regulations.

To frame the discussion surrounding the interpretation of conditions within an architectural discipline, it is important to situate the idea in relation to the concept of contingency.

Architecture is seldom associated with the notion of contingency. Ever since Vitruvius’ triad *utilitas, firmitas, venustas* (commodity, firmness, delight) set out in “De architectura” (Pollio and Morgan 1960), the discipline has become dominated by “agents of coherence” (Till 2013, p. 28) that impose visual order, and by association political influence, on the everyday environment in which we live.<sup>4</sup> To a certain extent, one could argue, the same mantra still prevails today. The concept of order is embedded deep into the modernist architectural project: “To create architecture is to put into order” (Le Corbusier 1991, p. 32).

Modernity, or more specifically the modern project, the ruthless practice of purification, separated nature and culture, categorizing previously overlapping disciplines into distinct entities. In his book *Architecture Depends* (Till 2013), the architect and academic Jeremy Till further elaborates the above point by making reference to the Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman. According to Bauman, the modern project has at its core the suppression of all vulnerable and contingent elements of human existence, within which architects “operate in a state of permanent denial of the residual power of any other order” (Till 2013, p. 34).

Modernity’s effect on the manner in which contingent conditions are valued was developed by the French sociologist and philosopher Bruno Latour, who in *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993) argues that in the pursuit of perfection, modernization has “compartmentalized previously interwoven forces into mutually exclusive entities.” Complex hybrid networks that existed for centuries in our pre-modern society have been rationalized, via strictly objective standards. Within this framework, architecture is evaluated as either functional or aesthetic, but never collectively as a hybrid contingent body. In the opinion of Latour, it is important to re-establish networks that “allow us to pass with continuity from local to global, from human to non-human” (Till 2013, p. 57), highlighting the importance and relevance of overlapping spheres of science, culture, and architecture.

The notion of “inhabited urban condition” is by no means a new field of research. The topic has in recent years become the source of extensive literature from a wide range of disciplines and experts. By contextualizing

the present arguments and positions, this chapter situates the Hong Kong condition within the present academic and professional discussion, and ultimately founds its relative theoretical position.

### ***Conditions of Place***

Beyond modernity, the relationship between place and space is a critical component in understanding how urban conditions are inhabited. According to the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, space is something that has been vacated, freed within a defined limit (Heidegger 1971). The concept of limit here relates the description of where something starts, as opposed to where something ends. Heidegger traces the etymology of the word to the Greek word *orismos*, concluding that spaces receive their essence from place, and not from space.

This position *vis-à-vis* the place where the condition occurs is essential in deciphering the existence of a condition.<sup>5</sup> For example, in one of the conditions analyzed in Shau Kei Wang later in this chapter, the inhabited relates directly to the traces and memories of a long-gone seashore line the community still respect and react to in their everyday life. The memory of the place remains embedded in both the local customs and physical vestiges of a prior life in the form of temples to the local divinity Tin Hau, who used to protect sailors embarking on perilous sea journeys and today continues to protect locals from contemporary evils.<sup>6</sup>

The meaning of everyday urban conditions we encounter is informed to a considerable degree by the fact that they inhabit shared worlds. The way they exist in the world is essentially structured by others. “The world of Dasein is a with-world,” Heidegger claims (Wrathall 2005, p. 52). As a result, our interpretation of conditions is dictated by the way others understand and interpret conditions, or in the case of Hong Kong, how others have interpreted and responded to these conditions beforehand.

### ***Conditions without Architects***

Rather than center the thesis of this chapter on Hong Kong’s macro intense urbanism, which has been the focus of numerous books, most recently *The Making of Hong Kong: From Vertical to Volumetric* (Shelton, Karakiewicz, and Kvan 2011), the attention here shifts toward small-scale micro situations typically dismissed as marginal or outright forgotten.

The idea originates from Bernard Rudofsky’s book *Architecture without Architects*. In his introduction, the author states: “*Architecture without Architects* attempts to breakdown our narrow concepts of the art of building by introducing the unfamiliar world of non-pedigreed architecture” (Rudofsky 1964, p. 6), developing in the course of the book a taxonomy

of anonymous, vernacular, and spontaneous architectural examples. Here, however, the focus is the architectural conditions that respond to Hong Kong's challenging spatial limits—where their existence varies in degrees of precariousness that are directly associated to their temporal status.

Urban conditions inherently work against the rigidity of the city, the city set out by planners, developers, and architects who seem to incessantly wax lyrical about public space. In fact, both words “public” and “space” have today become benign branding tools synonymous with the prevalent desired lifestyle. Collectively, architects and planners, via their speculative modus operandi of renderings and artificial visions, have contributed to a homogenous city that is alien to its very inhabitants.<sup>7</sup> Here, every new neighborhood is an upgraded replica of the previous. Present-day Hong Kong is overflowing with examples, such as areas in east Kowloon, Tiu Keng Leng, and Tseung Kwan O. Endless repetition of high-density housing typologies is interspersed with ubiquitous retail malls. Upon introduction, one feels immersed (as a result of certain demographic regulations, one mall per 100,000 inhabitants) in a state of constant *déjà vu*.<sup>8</sup> Paradoxically, it is in these areas that inhabited urban conditions re-create a level of abnormality, a break from the prevailing state of anonymity.

### ***Conditions as Material Transformations***

Transformations, *vis-à-vis* the physical change from one state to another, allow us to address the idea of urban conditions from another standpoint, such as conditions of materiality. Material and spatial conditions are characterized by the Danish architect Ander Abraham in his book *A New Nature: 9 Architectural Conditions between Liquid and Solid* (2015) as composite concepts capable of coexisting in the same space, creating a series of interconnected events. According to Abraham (2015, p. 31), architecture constitutes a very small part of “composite urban condition” within the modern city made up of constant transformation.

Conditions as a state of material transformation, although deviating slightly from the trajectory of the research in question, open a new way of thinking about architecture in the city. Conditions cease to be read as autonomous objects, more or less receptive to the local context, but become inseparable from context: there cannot be an inhabited condition without a material context.<sup>9</sup> Abraham's text further differentiates conditions from objects, where conditions are not defined by boundaries or form, but by multiple connections that he relates back to the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard's idea of a “multiplicity of little narratives.”<sup>10</sup>

Typically, to understand architecture one has to take a step back, to be able to visualize the object from a distance in terms of façade and form. On the contrary, to be able to fully comprehend a condition, one

has to remain inside the phenomena and absorb the composite nature of the forces at play from physical, aural, visual, and mental. According to Abraham (2015, p. 43), if architecture can be defined as a condition (of everything made by man), the “composite” dimension is its only manifestation. Large areas of the contemporary urban metropolis are governed by indeterminate forces bonded, in the words of Abraham, by a unique “character.” The material presence of the city, the composition of apparently random associations—that is, concrete and plastic, wood and stone—consolidate into spatial conditions that make the city legible, and hence inhabitable.

The relationship between form and non-form of a condition is critical to Abraham’s thesis, as the condition in his view stands in a state of constant genesis. He cites an indirect example to elucidate the point: a pool of water is a condition that has no form, but is a result of a specific action of spilling a liquid. To this extent, many of the urban conditions of Hong Kong result in indirect associated actions brought to life when juxtaposed with multiple other composite narratives.

### ***Conditions within the Grid***

According to Albert Pope (1996, p. 2), “the contemporary city, the city that is, at this moment, under construction, is invisible.” Much of the contemporary urban residuum found in our cities, rather than being ignored or forgotten, suffers from being unknown and inaccessible. With reference to the American city, Pope argues that suburbia’s characteristics completely alienate conventional urban readings, and have become an unprecedented form of urban development.

Without an adequate conceptual framework in place, the amorphous, unquantifiable spaces of the contemporary city will remain inaccessible not only to those who live in them, but also to those who design them. In response to this, Pope articulates a meticulously crafted argument around how the open city of the “grid” establishes an autonomous logic that allows the city to transform—the grid being identified as the key component allowing endless urban permutations to evolve.

Contrary to many other modern cities, Hong Kong, given its historical and geographical setting, did not develop from a predetermined *forma urbis*, but established itself in reaction to its extreme topography.<sup>11</sup> Understanding this difference allows us to identify how Hong Kong has come to exemplify many of the conditions Pope highlights, although his thesis does not directly name Hong Kong. It could be argued that Hong Kong’s constraints have given way to a reactive city of continuous adaptation to specific conditions, a careful urban calibration.

### ***Conditions of the In-between***

Rethinking the notion of contemporary urban spaces produced several recent publications which focus on the topic of “urban interstices” as representative territories where new social situations arise.<sup>12</sup> Interstitial conditions are by nature small spaces, and by default surrounded by other events and buildings. The morphology of the space and its inhabitation are always correlated, and the gap between (to quote the architecture landscape theorist Luc Levesque) generates, “something that is attractive and stimulating, an intensity that escapes the intentionality of planning: something paradoxical, from which inspiration can be drawn” (Levesque 2013, p. 21).

This intrigue with the urban gap has also been applied to Hong Kong in *Hong Kong In-between* (Borio and Wüthrich 2015). Following a research methodology developed by Atelier Bow-Wow in Tokyo,<sup>13</sup> Borio and Wüthrich explore the urban “back of house” condition where the “real city” occurs, arguing that these gaps act as lubricant to the engine of the city. Interestingly, the book concludes with a series of participatory projects exploring how these, so called “negative spaces” can become a positive identity of the city via minimal interventions that change people’s attitudes and allow such spaces to be reappropriated.

### **Reading Hong Kong’s Urban Dialects**

Hong Kong is in a constant state of transformation, where every square meter of its urban territory is transformed into an artificial, highly technical landscape. The interrelation between city and landscape, from infrastructural facilities to reclaimed land, is the product of a highly engineered pragmatic thinking (policy) of control. Yet, with an urban density of more than 30,000 inhabitants per square kilometer and an average residential area of about 11 square meters per person (Jenni 2015), together with a multi-assemblage of layers, another side of this unique city is often taken for granted.

### ***Hong Kong’s Density***

Of primary relevance to understanding Hong Kong’s conditions are its demographic density and its extreme topographical setting (an island surrounded by mountains and sea). A population of more than 7 million inhabiting an urban land area of just 120 square kilometers yields a concentration of people approaching 600 per hectare (Shelton, Karakiewicz, and Kvan 2011, p. 19). Hong Kong is a city where local practices still survive the relentless

march toward homogeneous modernization. Paradoxically, though, in this process of survival, such daily practices have become invisible to the casual passerby, merging into the background as anonymous contingent moments. These urban micro conditions, literal manifestations of the “everyday urbanism,” to quote Margaret Crawford (Chase, Crawford, and Kaliski 2008), represent the indissoluble connection between habitat and instances of social life, putting into question our traditionally modern interpretations of urbanism focusing on static and permanent conditions.

The urban conditions confronted in Hong Kong are based on the unique ground reality of the city—a landscape that constantly transforms, relying on its temporary existence. This kinetic urban reality, common to many Asian cities, generates a temporal background of overlaying circumstances each associated with a unique byproduct: planning codes, building regulations, and government covenants.<sup>14</sup> To this effect, urban conditions are relative entities, dependent upon specific spatial relationships. At first sight, this might not be evident, but only appears the more you digest their condition via observation, mapping, and drawing. These urban relationships contribute to a general condition of intensity reliant on multiple networks of activity.

### *The Hong Kong Discourse*

Hong Kong edifices are not built to be beautiful, they are built in a pragmatic way: rational and efficient. Hong Kong architecture is nothing more than an immediate expression of the specific condition. [MAP Office]

(Peckham 2011)

Many architects and critics have acknowledged and investigated these situations before. The most recent in-depth investigation of the topic has been produced by MAP Office, a multidisciplinary Hong Kong-based architectural practice led by Laurent Gutierrez and Valerie Portefaix, who, as their website claims, document how human beings subvert and appropriate space.<sup>15</sup> Another important study, *Hong Kong Typologies*, written by the Swiss architects and ETH professors, Christ & Gantenbein, traces a taxonomy of Hong Kong’s modern architectural heritage. Their position is that since all conditions in Hong Kong are radical (political, topographical, demographical, financial, and climatic), the associated architecture of the city is radical—or, one could argue, practical to the extent that functionality and efficiency become radical. A list of thirty-six examples of 20th-century buildings, each belonging to a specific type—pencil tower, gallery building, vertical factory, and shop house—is identified. These examples collectively reinforce strict regulations, imposed by the local



planning authorities and applied to the extreme conditions, and ultimately combined to produce a quasi-fictional reality.

The book also includes a series of contributions by local academics; of specific interest is “The Origin of Hong Kong Building Types” (Tieben 2010), which outlines the history of the urban built fabric of Hong Kong. In a quest for efficiency to establish the “Made in Hong Kong” brand, Hong Kong’s population increased by 1 million every decade to reach the 7 million of today (Tieben 2010, p. 39). According to Tieben, Hong Kong’s rapid urbanization is strictly correlated to historical events, most importantly the creation of the People’s Republic of China (1949), which started the wave of mass immigration. In the 1950s, Hong Kong consolidated its position as a free port, with the geopolitical situation (Korean War, 1950–1953) forcing the city into manufacturing. Many industrial estates were built next to mass housing complexes using similar designs and construction methods. With the value of domestic export continuing to rise, in the 1960s Hong Kong started to specialize in new industries, such as electronics, watches, toys and clothing—all labor-intensive.

In this regard, much of Hong Kong’s architecture can be explained by this search for efficiency and the maximum exploitation of site borne in mind. Hong Kong building types, according to Tieben, are fully imbedded into the vibrant life of the metropolis, where everyday life is strongly related to the condition of hyper-density.

### *Urban Dialect*

Inhabited urban conditions are a form of urban dialect indigenous to the area. These conditions reflect quotidian occurrences and at the same time present fragile temporality. They represent episodes disappearing at any one moment. The next moment allowing the residents to dwell, as they want; playing mah-jong with friends, gambling while smoking, and impromptu picnics.<sup>16</sup> According to La Cecla (1993, p. 38), these events, allow people to “acclimatize” themselves with their immediate environment. Representing instances that develop over time, local customs evolved over generations and through form of mentality rely on local practices and adaptations to circumstance.

Dialect, the language of the people, is implanted with infinite nuances and subtleties that go back centuries in the history of a culture. In the same manner, urban dialects relate to how people dwell within their respective environments, differentiating themselves from the standard language (the formal city). By not being composed of static structures, but reliant on mental patterns, or as La Cecla (1993, p. 70) states, “mental maps,” inhabitants have built-in strata of information: a collection of memories, events, and rituals. These maps constitute a common reference point of

spatial occurrences, and relate to the idea of urban condition. Conditions in this sense are relationships in the guise of meeting places, shortcuts, festivities, superimpositions, card games, and the secret alleyways of local inhabitants. This alter-identity, rather than the city being composed of architectural artifacts, means that they develop together with their inhabitants through complex networks that are typically disregarded by local planning authorities (in the name of modernization) as elements that should be at best avoided, and at worst eradicated. The identity of a city, according to their mindset, should be established by a set of regulations that install order (planning) and coherence into neighborhoods, with the unfortunate side effect of eliminating local urban dialects.

If the local urban dialect is embodied in the everyday condition, the common mother tongue language of Hong Kong, is defined by rules, the plethora of codes that regulate the city. Hong Kong is a city of regulations—one could describe it as the contemporary version of the Forbidden City (the palace in Beijing where no one could enter or leave without the emperor's permission). In Hong Kong, the “forbidden” relates to the denial of any common practices being performed in public spaces such as smoking, gambling, cycling, picnics, drinking, hanging out washing, drying food, fires, walking dogs, and cooking. Everything has to be sanitized and regulated, in the process pushing people to the edges, to undefined zones, residual spaces, no-man's lands where life can happen, where people can behave normally.

### Hong Kong Conditions

Our gaze travels through space and gives us the illusion of relief and distance. That is how we construct space, with an up and a down, a left and a right, an in front and behind, a near and a far. When nothing arrests our gaze, it carries a very long way. But if it meets with nothing, it sees only what it meets. Space is what arrests our gaze, what our sight stumbles over: the obstacles, bricks, an angle, a vanishing point.

*(Perec and Sturrock 1997, p. 81)*

Over the course of the last two years, at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, this urban research project aims to decipher exactly those conditions “our sight stumbled across,” as Perec describes above. The condition here becomes a tool to interrogate the collective DNA of how people inhabit such an extreme city, at the same time allowing the formulation of a position from which we can actually learn. Too often, in our quest to explain given urban situations, architects rush to assess. By association, they pass judgment, rather than assessing and postulating solutions. This study seeks

to accept and uncover the process behind how the city operates: from the invisible interconnected networks to the adjustable and adaptive systems that Hong Kong constantly generates to survive.

The five conditions chosen, each representing a specific category of urban coexistence, were selected to portray a multifaceted cross-section of Hong Kong's urban inhabitation. In this chapter, all the examples exclusively focus on Hong Kong Island, excluding important areas of Hong Kong such as Kowloon and the New Territories that would require a more extensive study. The research involved extensive fieldwork mapping, initially undertaken with graduate students at CUHK School of Architecture as part of an elective topical class in 2016, and later developed with Sungyeol Choi, a Research Assistant investigating the residual urban spaces within Hong Kong.<sup>17</sup>

The *modus operandi* revolved around two key components: photography and three-dimensional drawing. The photograph allows the inhabitation to be recorded, in a similar manner to August Sander, who concentrated on always taking portraits of his models in their natural working environment.<sup>18</sup> Each photograph sanctions a specific form of urban dwelling, while the 3D drawing reveals the morphology of the space, acting as a form of translation of the photograph, exposing the structure of the space in question. Borrowing from Christopher Alexander's "pattern language," a form of philosophy cultivates the exploration. This dual method of recording and digesting is critical in describing the condition at stake:

At the core . . . is the idea that people should design for themselves their own houses, streets and communities. This idea . . . comes simply from the observation that most of the wonderful places of the world were not made by architects but by the people.

(Alexander, Ishikawa, and Silverstein 1977)



**FIGURE 9.1** Location of the five urban conditions. Image by Peter Ferretto and Sungyeol Choi.

In a comparable manner, this research follows Alexander's format of treating urban conditions as entities that identify how local architecture spontaneously responds to given problems or situations. To this extent, the research presented here is empirical and relies on observing the social subculture of the city at work.

### 1: Occupy

Tucked away in a non-descript alley, Li Sing Street, off Queens Road West on Hong Kong Island, between the traditional neighborhoods of Sheung Wan and Sai Ying Pun, is a small fruit and vegetable store. This parasitic store embeds itself into a 30 centimeter leftover alcove. In this urban empty shelf, thinner than your conventional domestic bookshelf, lies a one-man business where the dimensions of the shop dictate every aspect of this ingenious business operation. Food displayed, security shutters, delivery, amount of food stored, and opening hours all depend on the extreme shop dimension.

The condition, a result of the vertiginous commercial rents achievable in Hong Kong and a series of urban/architectural contingent circumstances, is a common example of how a marginal and, to most people, insignificant space is occupied and transformed into a fully functioning commercial venture. When you look closer, it isn't simply the physical dimensions of the store that are taken to the extreme. The legality and the logistics of the situation are also shrewdly exploited. Technically, no commercial business



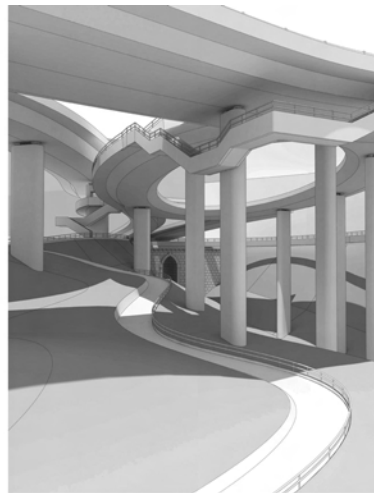
FIGURE 9.2 Shelf store: fruit and vegetable shop in Sheung Wan. Image by Peter Ferretto and Sungyeol Choi.

can invade the public road with permanent structures. Hence, the store works around temporary transformations, enabling the shop to all but disappear when not in use. The logistics likewise take advantage of the urban setting, with the adjacent alley being pedestrian-only. This forces the store to rely exclusively on motorbike delivery, with no associated storage space.

At a time when large parts of Hong Kong are rapidly being gentrified, Sai Ying Pun being a prime example, and entire neighborhoods are being artificially inseminated with massive hermetic developments, this condition represents an urban fragment of “reciprocity” (La Cecla 2014, p. 102).<sup>19</sup> It is an example of a micro transitional space, without which the city loses its “fraternal” dimension, as with the non-confrontational engagement with the real life of its citizens.

## 2: Byproduct

Hong Kong is a city that came into existence by accident.<sup>20</sup> The engineering acrobatics required simply to allow the city to function are almost preposterous. This site, located between a complex road network and the steep topography of the terrain on Government Hill, exemplifies this infrastructural “byproduct” condition. Historically the site, located in the vicinity of the Eliot Canal, built at the turn of the 20th century to provide water for the nearby Ice-house, has been the home to several important institutions, such as hospitals, the Catholic Cathedral, and many school buildings.



**FIGURE 9.3** Infrastructural spaces—Mid-Levels. Image by Peter Ferretto and Sungyeol Choi.

Today the site is completely bypassed, sitting below a 40 meter-high viaduct that connects the prosperous Mid-Levels area to Central (the financial heart of Hong Kong). The resulting “terrain vague,” to use the term coined by the Catalan urbanist Solà-Morales (1995), is an abandoned and unproductive space representing the anonymous reality of the city, an “urban pause” that allows the city to breathe.<sup>21</sup> These conditions are as much part of Hong Kong’s urban ecology as the famous landmark sites we are all aware of.

The inefficient character of the “byproduct” condition represents an important urban phenomenon. This uncontaminated void becomes unaffected by Hong Kong’s quest for efficiency and real estate development. Formative spaces act as interior urban realms from one end of the spectrum to the homogenized interiors of the Hong Kong Mall at the other. Their indeterminacy allows them to go unnoticed and at the same time offers opportunities for how the present status quo can be subverted.

### 3: *Mitigating*

The geological history of Hong Kong is vital in understanding the city’s built environment. The majority of the island consists of granitic rock, an extremely hard land-bed that precludes most subterranean developments. Compared to most other Asian metropolises, it is common to come across multi-story car parks entirely above ground, even given the high land values—a direct manifestation of the island’s geological landscape.



FIGURE 9.4 Superimposed rationalism, Braemer Hill. Image by Peter Ferretto and Sungyeol Choi.

Broadview Terrace (the name gives away the housing's primary asset) is a high-end residential compound built in 1974 on Cloud View Road in Braemer Hill, offering spectacular views over Hong Kong's harbor. Built right on the edge of the granite cliff, to maximize both views and plot coverage, the development has a bionic structure erected along the precipice to comply with two building codes: to accommodate private vehicle access and provide emergency fire access to all elevations. The result is the superimposition of a Terragni-esque structural white grid over the raw, exposed granite mountain, which, taken in isolation, produces an abstract reinforced concrete grid as a testament to the city's constant struggle to inhabit nature.<sup>22</sup>

This common mitigating condition, a form of topographical domestication, generates an artificial datum, a flat level from which a building line can be erected. Although the notion of artificial land is typically associated with reclaimed sea land in Hong Kong, such engineering techniques of adapting the existing topography equally create a manufactured condition of land colonization. Pure pragmatic functionalism assumes its own structural design identity, becoming an unforeseen city aesthetic.

#### 4: Ritual

Shau Kei Wan, located in the northeastern part of Hong Kong Island, is a relatively suburban district (an oxymoronic statement given its population in excess of 70,000, who live in a density of approximately 30,000

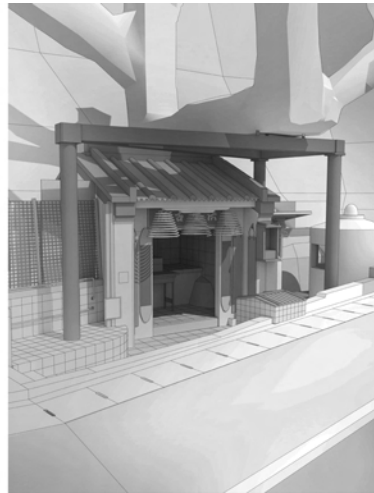


FIGURE 9.5 Hung Shing Temple, Shau Kei Wan. Image by Peter Ferretto and Sungyeol Choi.

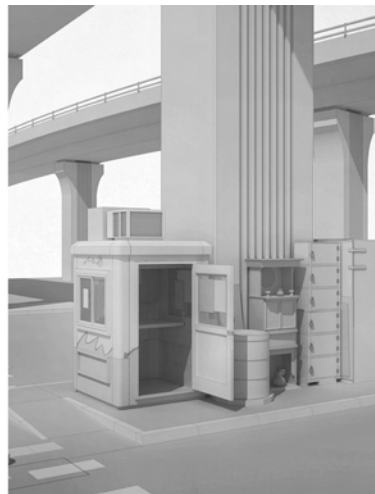


people per square kilometer). This region evolved from an 18th-century fishing village into a socially engineered hyper-dense landscape. However, the striking feature, given this radical transformation, is how the local community retain and live their everyday lives incorporating the vestiges of their traditional rituals.

Up to the late 1970s, Shau Kei Wan harbor used to be setting for a large, informal floating settlement, housing more than 20,000 inhabitants in floating structures that have all but disappeared.<sup>23</sup> Today, even though the fishing culture has vanished, the local community maintain a strong connection to the fishermen's spiritual beliefs, with temples dedicated to goddesses such as Tin Hau, who is venerated in the many scattered temples that remain embedded into the fabric of the neighborhood.<sup>24</sup>

This small, subsidiary temple to the adjacent main Hung Shing Temple, sits at the foot of a hill that used to house a large informal settlement.<sup>25</sup> The building, no bigger than a typical garden shed (3 × 3 meters), houses a statue of the scholar Hung Shing Ye, usually surrounded by fruit offerings. The open entrance is flanked by spiral incense burners. A local banyan tree, requiring steel bracing, perilously hangs above the roof of the temple, inducing a three-way state of symbiosis between building, nature, and spirit. The clear relationship here between people and place, via the participation of quotidian rituals, engenders an urban condition that goes far beyond contemporary “real estate” thinking and helps form a society rooted in invisible networks.

### 5: Residual



**FIGURE 9.6** Mobile station master's office, Shau Kei Wan Bus Terminus. Image by Peter Ferretto and Sungyeol Choi.



The final condition, also located in Shau Kei Wan district, 200 meters south of the temple mentioned above, is a residual condition produced as a derivative of three intersecting transportation infrastructures. The Island Eastern Corridor Expressway is a subsidiary bypass and an elevated pedestrian walkway. Ensnared below this transportation knot is Shau Kei Wan's main Bus Terminus, a perfectly efficient exercise in converting a potential urban wasteland into a thriving and propagating public amenity.

The more you look, the more you discover in Shau Kei Wan. Every aspect of this three-dimensional urban jigsaw has been cleverly adapted to incorporate public amenities. From functional public staircases becoming impromptu terraces for people to rest and watch the evolving daily narratives to the flyover acting as an integrated bus shelter, life seems to permeate this contingent site. Yet it is only through a slow process of mapping the territory that one is fully able to comprehend the complexity of the dynamics at work.

Stuck to a huge concrete pier supporting the flyover above is a temporary mobile facility equipped with a fiberglass cabin (the station master's office), a disused oil tank (an impromptu garden with local ferns and a rose tree), a mini-shrine to the Han Dynasty warlord Kuan Yu (a three-tier red timber bookshelf structure), and a six-compartment locker unit (red metal, with associated changing room). To many, this humble and anonymous condition, apparently disconnected from any urban discourse, has little relevance in explaining and justifying how the present Hong Kong works. However, this residual condition demonstrates how commonly discarded urban spaces rely on a network of adjacencies, contextual and cultural, in order to connect seemingly disconnected and abandoned spaces.

## Toward a Culture of Condition

Increasingly we live in a “cultural supermarket” in which the world's cultural forms, in areas from food to religion to music to architecture, are to some extent available for appropriation by everyone.

*(Mathews 2013, p. 55)*

The cultural identity of a place from an anthropological perspective, as argued by the Hong Kong-based anthropologist Gordon Mathews, 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 culturally “pure” nor culturally “free.” Hong Kong is a city that lies between extreme polarities of the political, national, economical, and architectural. In architectural terms, there is the extremely formal (designed and branded architecture) contrasted with the informal, unplanned, organic city (adaptive, temporary, and

## CONDITION

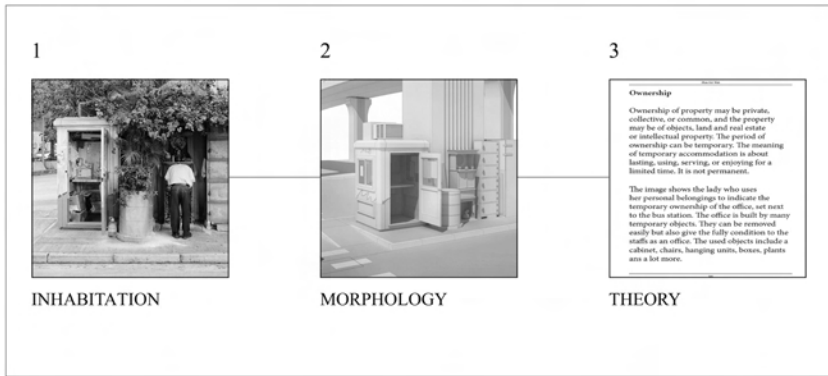


FIGURE 9.7 Diagram of the research methodology. Image by Peter Ferretto and Sungyeol Choi.

spontaneous architecture). Precisely between these two positions lies the architectural identity of Hong Kong.

“Condition” is a word with multiple readings: as a noun it relates the state of something, its appearance, quality, and circumstances, while as a verb it implies influence, constraint, and control. These two understandings are critical to the thesis of this chapter. On the one hand, the urban condition narrates the physical characteristics of our city, as described in the first section of the chapter. In particular, the situations that belong to the “background city” and how everyday practices of inhabitation—the hyper-local—help establish an “urban dialect” which mostly 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 through drawing.

Working in a similar manner to an ethnographer, the research outlined in this chapter presents readings taken from direct observations, a collection of moments and situations (condensed into five conditions) representing an empirical record of the present, the “here and now” of a city in constant flux. The interpretation of conditions, which I classify as a form of urban hermeneutics, is an important methodology to decipher the nuances of the city. This methodology employs a three-part process—Photograph/Inhabitation, Drawings/Morphology, Text/Theory—in order to distinguish and decode often-discarded urban situations.

Most of the conditions highlighted in this chapter would not typically be associated with the recognized identity of Hong Kong. They represent a taxonomy of the “other” Hong Kong, to borrow the concept coined by Foucault (1984). These in-between worlds, neither here nor there, belong

somewhere between utopia and dystopia, or the heterotopia of Foucault, acting 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.

Architecture has the power to affect people's lives, beyond the functional and the practical. To this effect, this chapter explores how the customs and rituals of the "urban dialect" provide a background to our lives and contribute to a shared reality. To conclude: "The relationship between space and activity is evidently neither a compelling certainty nor open and random, but complex and variable" (Jones 2016), where Hong Kong's background is complicit in this complexity, molding our habits, beliefs, and expectations, and most importantly, providing a framework of relationships. The framework of the background city enables architecture to be understood as a coexistent platform, beyond Vitruvius' paradigm of *utilitas*, *firmitas*, *venustas*, as mentioned in the introduction to the chapter, but rather related to space, time, and memory. Memory has the ability to both preserve the past and also adapt and manipulate the present, and in this respect alludes to the driving word of this chapter: "condition."

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Finally I would like to thank Mr. Sungyeol Choi, the Research Assistant who helped me assemble the material for this chapter.

## Notes

- 1 This is a reference to the director Spike Jonze's magic realism film *Being John Malkovich* (1999), where the protagonist works in a strange low-ceilinged office located on the 7½th floor of the Mertin-Flemmer Building in Manhattan.
- 2 La Cecla uses the Italian word *ambiente*, which, although it translates into English as "environment," embodies a wider notion, suggesting elements of atmosphere and ambience associated to places and spaces.
- 3 A reference to Lévi-Strauss' structuralist epic *Tristes tropiques* (2012).
- 4 This point is argued by Jeremy Till in his book *Architecture Depends* (2013), where he establishes a counter-notion of architecture as a contingent discipline inherently dependent on external and unpredictable agents to become reality.

- 5 Heidegger uses the word *Dasein* to describe our way of being—that is, existing in a place with particular things and established ways of doing things.
- 6 Tin Hau, a Chinese sea goddess venerated throughout Southern Asia, is the patron protector of sailors and fishermen.
- 7 I refer here to Hong Kong, but this argument could easily apply to so many other contemporary cities.
- 8 This is a hypothetical number; for a detailed retail planning policy. See Planning Department, Government of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, *Hong Kong Planning Standards and Guidelines: Summary* (March 2017), [https://www.pland.gov.hk/pland\\_en/tech\\_doc/hkpsg/sum/pdf/sum\\_en.pdf](https://www.pland.gov.hk/pland_en/tech_doc/hkpsg/sum/pdf/sum_en.pdf) (accessed June 29, 2018).
- 9 To understand the urban materiality of Hong Kong, it is important to differentiate between formal and informal materials. The formal—that is, the materials that belong to the domain of capital-“A” architecture (buildings designed by architects) has a relentless repetitive quality such as the ubiquitous marble ceramic tile that clads endless public and private surfaces. In contrast, the informal materials, the everyday materials that belong to lower-case-“a” architecture (informal, temporary street buildings), constantly adapt and possess a tactile and visceral quality.
- 10 For further reading, see *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, (Lyotard, Bennington, and Massumi 1984), where the idea of grand, universal narratives is contrasted with metanarratives—that is, small and local narratives.
- 11 Following the First Opium War, Hong Kong was ceded by China to Britain under the Treaty of Nanking, signed on August 29, 1842, becoming a Crown Colony of the British Empire.
- 12 See Brighenti (2013).
- 13 Atelier Bow-Wow is an architectural office in Tokyo formed by Yoshiharu Tsukamoto and Momoyo Kaijima, who have published several books about the city most notably *Made in Tokyo* (2001).
- 14 The concept of the “kinetic city” has been elaborated by the Indian architect and MIT professor Rahul Mehrotra, who advocates the potential of designing for informality in the city. According to Mehrotra, the kinetic city is about activity, not architecture.
- 15 [www.map-office.com](http://www.map-office.com) (accessed June 29, 2018).
- 16 Mah-jong is a famous Cantonese board game played with 144 domino-like tiles on a square table.
- 17 General Research Fund, Research Grants Council of Hong Kong, *Urban Pauses: Reclaiming Hong Kong’s Residual Urban Spaces* (2016).
- 18 August Sander (1876–1964), a German Portrait photographer, famous for his *Faces of Our Times* documentary.
- 19 In Hong Kong, gentrification is today generally associated with the arrival of the Mass Transit Railway (MTR) subway system in a neighborhood, with the MTR coincidentally opening a new station in Sai Ying Pun in 2015.
- 20 Contrary to other major Chinese cities such as Guangzhou, Beijing, or Shanghai, which developed historically following an urban structure, Hong Kong was developed by the British as a reactive engineered city, with trade as the main driver. Large parts of Hong Kong’s territory come from reclaimed land, and infrastructure constantly mitigates the island’s harsh topography.
- 21 A term I am currently researching in connection to the notion of “residual spaces” in Hong Kong. See note 17.
- 22 This refers to Giuseppe Terragni’s rationalist magnum opus, the Casa del Fascio building in Como, Italy (1932–1936).

- 23 The last remaining examples of a floating village can be found in Lantau Island, in the fishing town of Tai O.
- 24 See note 6.
- 25 The temple of Hung Shing is dedicated to the scholar Hung Hei, a righteous government official who won the approval of the local people during his tenure in office through his scholarly study of astronomy, geography, and mathematics, eventually establishing an observatory in the area to predict meteorological changes. Ever since, prayers to him are thought to contribute to the wellbeing of fishermen and sea traders.

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