

## **Chapter 2.**

### **Hong Kong: A spatial story**

#### **2a. Chapter introduction**

This chapter consists of an historical examination of the ‘production’ of urban space in Hong Kong. This entails a synthetic account of the interaction of ‘actual’ physical spaces, contested social relations and representations. In insisting on the historicity and specificity of Hong Kong I have emphasized the importance of the colonial structuring and regulation of Hong Kong, while at the same time giving weight to the parallel creation of the Chinese city through various residential, commercial and industrial activities. The lived space of Hong Kong has been produced in a complex collision of colonial administrative strategies and local practices that were often directly resistant to colonial conceptions and plans. But while British and Chinese urban practices may have been opposed in many ways, there were also symbiotic elements which resulted in the creation of a heterogeneous mercantile city.

This chapter develops an account of the city and the emergence of Hong Kong’s urban ‘character’. I point to some spatial qualities and local practices which have a continuity with lived space in contemporary Hong Kong? Some of these qualities – an interpenetration of practices within the same space, a certain aptitude for crowds and bustle, a corporeal sense of motion and the sensory exchange of the streets – are palpable aspects of the experience of Hong Kong space. Of course, considered separately these qualities are hardly unique to Hong Kong and could be found in many cities. In concert they constitute a singular sense of place.

My account roughly divides Hong Kong’s spatial production into two periods: the colonial city formed in the nineteenth century and the ‘modern’ planned space that began to emerge from the 1950s. Modern planning emerged with housing crisis in the 1950s rather than as a product of systematic planning. Nevertheless large scale public housing provision eventually set in train a planning regime which has led to a restructuring of the built environment and urban form, which has few parallels.

Extensive building of high rise estates, decentralised new-towns and extensive transport infrastructure have had major effects on the lived experience of the city. Nevertheless, I argue that there are substantial continuities in spatial dispositions that have carried over into planned spaces and approaches to planning in contemporary Hong Kong. The period of transition to intensively planned space is of direct relevance to my informants who have all experienced major changes in the nature of residential spaces and urban form. Linked to this are the effects of economic development which has both driven and been propelled by spatial changes.

I am arguing from the premise that Hong Kong subjects have acquired a set of dispositions attuned to negotiating specific environments in Hong Kong. Such dispositions do not simply change immediately, despite the Promethean physical changes that have occurred. Dispositions can only be grasped if we gain some sense of the conditions of their formation. My larger purpose is to gain some understanding of the experiences, social memories and spatialised values of Hong Kong emigrants in order to be able to analyse the dispositional accommodations of subjects encountering quite different spatial conditions in Sydney. I attempt to link these insights to what I will term the ‘spatial dispositions’ of my informants. These are part (but only part) of a habitus which provides a context and resources for further actions, including migration. This will only emerge over the course of a number of chapters. The nature of migration will be investigated through the collision of different urban spaces.

## **2b. Hong Kong as colonial entrepôt**

There can be no avoiding colonialism as a basic context for Hong Kong’s history: urban Hong Kong was basically created in the period of British rule, which has only recently ended. In the terminology of Redfield and Singer, Hong Kong is a ‘heterogenetic’ city, created out of a relatively recent juxtaposition between cultures of the colonizer and colonized <sup>1</sup> (Won Bae Kim *et al* 1997: 4). Urbanists and historians have attempted to define typologies of the ‘colonial city’. This term

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<sup>1</sup> As opposed to an ‘orthogenetic’ city such as Hanoi, which was already an historic capital and bearer of a distinct cultural form before the era of French colonization (Won Bae Kim *et al* 1997: 4).

generally refers to cities colonized by European powers in non-European regions in the ‘age of imperialism’ which saw most of the globe drawn into a capitalist economic system and system of nation states. Some writers go further in asserting colonial cities as precursors of contemporary urban forms and structures, such as planning regimes, suburbs, cosmopolises, and ‘world cities’.<sup>2</sup> In some cases, as with Hong Kong, these cities have become major nodes of global trade and communications. Briefly, major features defining colonial cities are: the dominance of a colonial minority; the imposition of one economic and political system onto another, and; an antagonistic relationship where one (or more) people are subjected (King 1990: 20). This was largely expressed through a discourse of race as a primary principle of social division. ‘Colonial societies with their complex matrix of indigenous, immigrant and colonialist groups were not only characterised by racial, cultural, social and religious pluralism but also a social stratification system which privileged *race* as the key mode of reference group ascription.’ (Perry *et al* 1997: 51) A hierarchy of places emerged out of the distinctive practices of colonized and colonizer and the differential access to social goods of racialised communities.

Hong Kong was founded as part of Britain’s imperial drive into China. Following the humiliation of China in the Opium Wars of 1839-42, Hong Kong Island was seized as a ‘concession’.<sup>3</sup> Hong Kong was chosen and developed for its position – its proximity to Guangzhou – long the only Chinese port open to foreign traders – and for its fine harbour. Hong Kong’s Victoria Harbour would become the only deep-water port between Singapore and Shanghai. As an entrepôt port, its *raison d’être* was to gain maximum trading advantages in relation to already established economic structures. Almost all of the ‘treaty ports’ subsequently ‘negotiated’ by Western powers between 1842 and 1937, like Hong Kong, were strategically established in close proximity to the major existing Chinese trading centres (Murphey 1974: 19). British colonial enterprise remained essentially mercantile rather than industrial, drawing on established Chinese resources and industries. This was very different to the situation in India and Southeast Asia where the colonialist rationale was to

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<sup>2</sup> See for instance: Archer 1997; King 1974, 1985, 1990a; Rabinow 1989; and Jacobs 1996.

<sup>3</sup> The received story from colonial history is that Hong Kong was merely a ‘barren rock’ off the coast of China, although it is known that several thousand lived in villages at the time of British settlement. Further forced concessions from China later led to the expansion of the territory – namely the cession of Kowloon Peninsula in 1860, and the 99-year lease on the New Territories in 1898. This brought the

construct a system independent of existing productive and commercial structures, often involving the destruction of indigenous industries and markets. Conversely, Chinese enterprises rapidly emerged alongside British businesses in the context of the ‘laissez faire’ administration of the colony (Chiu & Hung: 25). Hong Kong was from the start a site of opportunity and possibility for Chinese as well as Europeans to exploit Hong Kong’s strategic position, which is not to say that both competed on an equal basis. This is not to deny the autocratic nature of many aspects of British rule, and the many social exclusions involved.

From an early stage the envisioning of Hong Kong was integral to its constitution. Hong Kong’s first colonial governor, Sir Henry Pottinger, had opposed proposals for a large military cantonment in the central foreshore area along Queens Road, on the grounds that it would make ‘the face of the Island a mere military position in lieu of ...a vast emporium of commerce and wealth.’<sup>4</sup> It was this vision of Hong Kong Island – the image of the emporium – that historically won out. This commercial ‘face of the island’ is still the one most visible, both to the outside world and to Hong Kong’s inhabitants. The imaginary of Hong Kong as a primarily economic space possessed of a quasi-magical power has persisted, not only amongst rulers and boosters. My informants would still be speaking of Hong Kong in the 1990s as a ‘place for making money’, a treasure box, a pearl.

### **2c. Production of space in Hong Kong**

The historical continuities in the way that Hong Kong has been represented and imagined require some theoretical explanation. ‘Urban space’ is not simply material arrangements and spatial form, but a dynamic embodiment of ideas and practices, a ground for ongoing practices and struggles to define a place, its qualities and hierarchies. Cities and their spatial divisions embody and represent all these divisions – moral codes and aesthetic distinctions, functional and symbolic separations entailing differing access to goods and opportunities. While these social processes are hardly unique to cities, the centralisation and intensification of these

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area of Hong Kong up to its present area of 1095 square kilometres.

<sup>4</sup> Pottinger cited in Endacott, p. 47.

processes in cities produces powerful ‘images’ which can illuminate historical directions and tendencies (Low 1996: 384).

In attempting to establish a relation between an historical place and the social being of people who inhabit it, I draw on the work of Henri Lefebvre. For Lefebvre, the production of space is integrally connected to economic development and the social relations which capitalism produces and which produce it. In addition to being produced and reproduced through labour and various repetitive and routinized material practices which embody aspects of social relations, the space of a city is able to be constructed and co-ordinated due to the existence of abstract conceptions of space which allow rational planning, surveying, quantification, the possibility of reproduction in other locations and exchange through money. At the same time, a city is experienced and imagined by its inhabitants as singular place, as “a visualisation...which serves to conceal repetitiveness.” (Lefebvre 1991: 75) Everyday practice always occurs in the context of the unique and specific experience of lived space as a ‘second nature’, as a naturalised life-world which is both a product and an ongoing work. (Lefebvre 1991: 109) While being composed of elements common and transposable to other places to which it is systemically connected (through the operation of markets, transport and communication systems, planning conceptions, technologies etc.), the space of a city as lived space is felt to be ‘natural’ and unique. Lefebvre’s three-way dialectical scheme in *The Production of Space* provides a starting point for relating the built environment to everyday practices, dispositions, representations and ideologies, without causally privileging any one ‘moment’.

## **2d. Built space and local practices**

The original British settlement in 1841 was located around what is now Central (*Jung waahn*), still Hong Kong’s administrative and business hub. The Central area, now extended to neighbouring Admiralty and Wan Chai forms a central business district, concentrating corporate and administrative power, and linkages to global corporate institutions.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> There is a considerable continuity in the location of buildings and property of some key institutions in Central: for example, the Legislative Council Building, formerly the Supreme Court, merchant

Adjacent and to the east of Central was Sheung Wan, the original centre of Chinese Hong Kong. Chinese houses appeared simultaneously in Sheung Wan, while the first Chinese firms began to set up in a few streets around Bonham St and Wing Lok St (Tsai 1993: 61). The Chinese commercial economy in Hong Kong centred on *nam-pak-hong* (literally businesses trading between north and south) trades in characteristic Chinese food products, medicines and wines. Up until about 1945, Sheung Wan remained 'the unchallenged centre of Chinese Hong Kong, with its Chinese wholesaling trades, its traffic by sea to and from Canton, its restaurants and tea-houses'. Until the expansion of Kowloon in the late 1930s, Sheung Wan maintained its 'preponderance in investment, prestige and activity over all other areas of the city except Central District.' (Leeming 1977: 45) It was not until after World War II that Yaumatei and Monkong along the axis of Nathan Rd. in Kowloon, eclipsed Sheung Wan as the retail and commercial hub of Chinese Hong Kong.

The development of Hong Kong was certainly characterised by racial segregation. Nevertheless, Hong Kong was not as systematically segregated in terms of spatialised racial zones as in other colonial cities. A comparison with Singapore's colonial planning history is illustrative. (Singapore provides the closest historical comparison with Hong Kong, due to their small size and population density and the many parallels between their colonial histories and subsequent development.<sup>6</sup> Hence, throughout this chapter I use a number of comparisons and contrasts between Hong Kong and Singapore.)

From the start of its (British) colonial settlement Singapore was planned as a city in which principles of separation were paramount, and were enacted through physical planning.<sup>7</sup> By contrast, Hong Kong appears to have built in a much more erratic

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houses such as Jardine and Swire, and the headquarters of financial institutions such as the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank.

<sup>6</sup> Both cities emerged as nineteenth century colonial entrepôt ports under British rule and developed as major global trading centres. Both cities were to develop significant manufacturing capacities in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century and later emerged as finance and service centres. Accompanying this 'economic miracle' were major public housing programs and the urban restructuring of the past forty years. The main divergence has been its recent political history, with Singapore becoming independent in 1965. For comparative analyses of the two cities see: Drakakis and Yeung 1977; Castells et al 1990; and Chiu and Lui 1997.

<sup>7</sup> The original town of 1822 was planned as a grid form along the shoreline. As the immigrant population grew, separate 'kampungs' were delineated for particular racial and economic groups,

manner. A ‘haphazard, scarcely planned or plannable settlement growing raggedly along a miserably inadequate strip of shelving shore, and administered by a set of amateurs’ was the ‘inescapable’ judgement of one historian (Cameron 1991: 38). This would not change for over a century, as Hong Kong remained one of the least planned of colonial cities. Nevertheless, the assumption of cultural and racial separateness, of the incommensurability of British and Chinese worlds underpinned colonial practices.<sup>8</sup> Colonial governance exhibited many paradoxes. ‘Indirect rule’ could be merely a pretext for a lack of responsibility for providing the most basic resources, while creating the conditions for maximising economic surplus, and prioritising specific economic interests over the social interests of the larger populace. At the same time, the colonial administration maintained (as the present regime continues to maintain) a monopoly on land supply. From the beginning, in 1841, a decision was taken for the Crown to retain ownership of land, controlling the release of land for specific purposes, and then only for lease, usually for periods of 75 or 99 years (A. Smart 1992: 25). State control of land would provide a source of enormous revenue in the form of land ‘releases’, Crown rents and land rates.

The British could never rule Hong Kong without Chinese help. Firstly, non-Chinese never made up more than a small percentage of the total population.<sup>9</sup> Secondly, it wasn’t long before Hong Kong-based Chinese enterprises became a significant part of trading and shipping. While the local Chinese were formally excluded from political and administrative decision-making, various Chinese acted as mediators to represent and translate between Chinese and British interests, economic and civil, in a process of ‘elite management’ (Tsai 1993:70). In physical terms, the town was divided roughly into Chinese and European quarters, although the limited space and minimalist planning policies would force the two into close proximity with somewhat blurred boundaries. Hong Kong social relations pivoted on cultural go-

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segregating residential areas as far as possible. The European town was located east of the government area while Chinese, Arabs, Bugis, and Malays were allocated separate areas on the periphery (Perry et al 1997: 4).

<sup>8</sup> At the beginning of colonial settlement the Chinese were supposedly to be governed under separate legal codes to those of Europeans. The Chinese were to be administered ‘according to the laws, customs, and usages of the Chinese by the elders of villages, subject to the control of a British magistrate.’ (Norton-Kyshe in Tsai 1993: 38; Welsh 138). Although this legal arrangement proved administratively untenable, the presupposition of separate social worlds remained. The general policy of governance could be described as ‘leaving things Chinese to the Chinese’ (Welsh 1993: 392).

<sup>9</sup> In 1862 there were just over 3,000 non-Chinese out of a total population of 123,000, and in 1895, under 11,000 non-Chinese out of a quarter of a million (Welsh 1993: 253).

betweens, such as the ‘compradors’ who mediated between colonial and Chinese business interests. A loose policy of separation of communities was maintained until the late nineteenth century, when the colonial government attempted a partial political integration to take more direct control over the Chinese community. (Tsai 1993: 39) A paradox of spatial segregation is that it ensures autonomy and even reinforces a high degree of cultural difference, limiting the integration that makes hegemony possible.

In common with many other Asian colonial centres, high population pressure, housing scarcity for native working populations, high densities and crowded conditions were consistent features. New building forms were produced to house the large number of native urban workers – what one historian termed the ‘warehousing of the laboring classes’ (Home 1997: 85). In cities like Bombay and Calcutta, the dominant form of housing was a long narrow tenement building built up to a maximum of five stories known as the *chawl* (Home 1997: 103). In Hong Kong, housing conditions were often as dense and impoverished. The basic housing form was the *tong l’ou* (Chinese style) tenement, or shophouse, which remained the typical and most common built structure until the 1960s. The shophouse appears to be an adaptation of houses in south China which featured a ground floor shop with accommodation above, a ‘hierarchical arrangement of spaces, which extended from the more public at the front to the more private at the back’. (Home 1997: 103-4) A 1935 report on labour conditions describes the most typical form of housing in Hong Kong for the past 60 years.

The old fashioned, but still the most common type of Chinese tenement house is of three or four storeys, often with a shop on the ground floor. The...depth is about 43’6” and the ...frontage, which is determined by the length of the China fir pole, about 13’6”. The height of the flats might be 13’ but this is frequently utilised to erect a cockloft over part of the floor. Such a flat might be likened to a pigeon hole with an open verandah, windows between the verandah and the flat proper and the other end blocked by a kitchen but with a window in the corner over a covered yard. It is frequently let to a principal tenant who occupies a proportion of the flat and sub-lets the remainder in cubicles to as many individuals or families as he or she can crowd in. A flat in normal times may have as many as 25 adults stowed away in cubicles, bedspaces and cocklofts ... (H. R. Butters, in Leeming 1977: 20)

The shophouse-tenement<sup>10</sup> was characterised by the flexible internal partitioning of each floor of the building, to create separate sections which could be let, and sublet, to numerous users, who all had access to a common stairway via a common passageway. This building form was matched to a nested and hierarchical society of rentiers and renters which catered for different degrees of social viability, within a general context of scarcity. If this housing was characterised by intense crowding, low standards of hygiene and few amenities, it was also flexible and suited to a style of urban life based on proximity to the resources of the streets. A similar building tradition in Singapore was characterised as: ‘... a system well-adapted to the needs of immigrants in search of cheap lodgings, and to the laboring classes who spent little time at home but were dependent on hawkers for cheap and quick meals and on the social life of the streets.’ (Yeoh 1996: 180) This ‘adaptation’ based on necessity has generated tastes and proclivities that have extended into the present.

Nineteenth century Hong Kong was a rapidly expanding trading port that required large amounts of labour. The immigrant population of Hong Kong was at first predominantly male forming a ‘coolie’ work force serving the needs of the port infrastructure.<sup>11</sup> Workers were generally housed by occupational groups, such as cargo workers or rickshaw bearers, nearby to the place of labour. Most labourers could not afford to pay for transport and had to live in close proximity to their work (Tsai 1993: 111). Densities were high: British reports characterised Chinese residential areas as ‘inconceivably crowded.’ Overcrowding was the only means by which poorly paid labourers could afford housing. Chinese labourers generally opposed regulations which sought to upgrade housing and sanitary conditions on the

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<sup>10</sup> The tenement is not just a building form, but also an institutionalised social relation, as Plunz and Abu-Lughod (1994) point out in a study of New York tenements. The very name implies a relation between landlords, tenants and often subtenants – it comes from the same root as tenure and tenant. In medieval times it meant a dwelling place. By the 16th century in England and Scotland it came to refer to a building subdivided into rooms rented to separate families and individuals. In New York, the tenement had entered the technical vocabulary by the 1860s as a specific type of housing – built on 25 x 100 foot standard building lots established by the 1811 grid plan, each of which could house up to 150 persons. By 1890, 80,000 tenements housed 2.3 million.

<sup>11</sup> According to Tsai, about 80% of the Chinese population relied chiefly on manual labour. In 1848, 80% of the total 21,500 population were men, most of whom had traveled from various regions in southern China without families. Even in 1865, 63% of the 125,000 inhabitants were male. This was based on data from the 1881 and 1901 censuses (Tsai 1993: 104).

grounds that housing would become even scarcer and more expensive and that additional taxes would be imposed (Chan Wai Kwan 1991: 152-3, 159).

Since most (British) historiography of Hong Kong consists of accounts of the deeds of colonial big men bringing order to unruly natives, it yields little sense of the texture of urban life from a local (Chinese) perspective. In *Contesting Space: Power Relations and the Urban Built Economy*, Brenda Yeoh gives a convincing account of Singapore's urban spaces as sites of struggle between colonial planning and indigenous ways of being. I want to use this account to throw some light on somewhat similar dynamics, in the absence of such material on Hong Kong.

While Singapore was segregated by race, attempts to control 'native' spaces from without were largely unsuccessful. Attempts to regulate built spaces were frequently the subject of contestation: 'sites of control and resistance, simultaneously drawn upon by, on the one hand, dominant groups to secure conceptual or instrumental control, and on the other hand, subordinate groups to resist exclusionary definitions or tactics and to advance their own claims' (Yeoh 1996: 313). Such contestations could come from indigenous elites, who were sometimes able to lend support for the legitimacy of local practices. More consistently, and problematically for administrations, they would arise from ordinary practices of people engaged in the everyday usage of 'lived space' – house forms, the use of streets, modes of combining productive work and residence and trade. Yeoh uses the example of the struggle over 'verandah' space. Verandahs, or 'five-foot ways', on all streets, were introduced by Raffles in 1822. Subsequent administrations tried to maintain the verandah as an unobstructed open public space, a right of way for pedestrians. Through the use of by-laws they maintained the existence of the verandah into the twentieth century.<sup>12</sup> These seemingly minor rulings were the subject of continuous non-compliance and resistance, culminating in substantial riots in 1888, in which all shops were closed and the city brought to a standstill (Yeoh: 243-71). Yeoh sees this

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<sup>12</sup> The regulation of verandahs appears to have been an innovation of Raffles in Malaya, and may have been based on buildings he had seen in Batavia, influenced by southern European arcades and squares. According to Home (1997: 106) the building form spread, through administrative by-laws, to much of South-East Asia and Hong Kong. Indeed, early building regulations in Hong Kong seemed to have been modeled on the 'Shophouse Rafflesia' – streets were to be at least 20 feet wide, houses set back 5 feet from road, and to have verandahs (Cameron 1991: 36). But these regulations were ineffective against actual practices.

conflict as a struggle between differing cultural perceptions and practical logics. The administrative viewpoint embodied a specific view of ‘public space’, one that made a clear distinction between the private and the public. Richard Sennett (1994: 264) has argued for the prevalence of the bodily metaphor of circulation in European planning. In the eighteenth century planners began to use the image of veins or arteries (a ‘sanguine mechanics’) to describe urban traffic systems. In the emerging European industrial order, pavements and streets had (at least theoretically) become channels between spaces of work and dwelling – street life for itself was discouraged. But native inhabitants’ sense of street space was different. In a crowded urban environment with scarce spatial and material resources, survival strategies required a multiplicity of contact points, spaces capable of accommodating more than one use at a time. In Singapore, verandah space was used for multiple purposes, such as storage by shopkeepers, advertising, and the display of goods. Verandah space provided a place where people could congregate out of their crowded rooms, talk, and make connections. It could be sub-let to hawkers and stallholders or temporarily used for festivals, *wayang* performances, weddings or funerals. Street space was never removed from relations of power and exchange (Yeoh 1996: chapter 7). Hong Kong also exhibited this tension between a regulatory model of ‘civic’ space, and practical lived space – where people have made a virtue out of necessity by valuing a dense and often fiercely competitive way of living. Native cities prove difficult to discipline, and European civic ideals proved difficult to transpose. This description of the unruly nature of Hong Kong’s urban space comes from the inquiry into Sanitary Conditions in Hong Kong conducted by the Colonial Office in 1882:

(T)he demand for house-room in Hong Kong vastly exceeds the supply. Every available space is at once filled and the overwhelming population overflows the dwelling into the street. The cook cannot find room or light in the cookhouse to chop wood, so he comes out into the street to do so, much to the detriment of the side-channel. Washing and other domestic operations are conducted on the sidewalk which, but for the vigilance of the police would very soon be occupied by artizans and small dealers. Indeed, in many cases the sidewalks are already occupied by huxters stalls. (O. Chadwick cited in Leeming 1977: 160)

In this official, though critical account of life in Chinese Hong Kong we can glimpse the unity of two aspects, the lived experience of housing scarcity, overcrowding and the lack of basic amenities, and the urban practices which incorporate these conditions into a way of being.<sup>13</sup> While the tone of this report is certainly not one of approval, it does seem to recognise the basis of this excess of practical life and its tendency to 'overflow' boundaries of civic space.

Proclamations threatening squatters with eviction from the Queen's Road date from 1844. Street hawking has remained a persistent feature of Hong Kong life until the present. There were an estimated 50-70,000 illegal hawkers in the 1980s (J. Smart 1989: 17). As Josephine Smart argues, the persistence of hawking in a successful industrialised economy cannot be fully explained by the usual factors of unemployment, poverty and marginality used to explain black economies in 'less developed' nations (J. Smart 1989: 123). Street hawkers still occupy a significant part of the retail market in Hong Kong, supplying a huge range of goods from fresh foodstuffs to computers and electrical goods. Their services are generally appreciated by Hong Kong people, providing a diversity of goods, cheaper prices, easy availability and street life.

All of this suggests the endurance of a 'corporeal city', built on strategies of 'survival in the visceral and permeable economy of effluence and excess.' (Chambers 1994: 104-5)<sup>14</sup> Chambers was writing of Naples, a city often romanticised for its proletarian features. A corporeal city is constituted by spatial practices apparently at odds with modernist conceptions of urban planning and its clear functional separations. Walter Benjamin had written of the built space of Naples:

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<sup>13</sup> Hong Kong people often took political action to defend this way of being against reforms which were ostensibly 'improvements'. For instance, in 1895 there was a major strike by coolie workers in response to lodging house regulations aimed at improving sanitary conditions and relieving overcrowding in coolie houses. The strike was directed at restrictions on coolie houses which ruled that: at least 7 cubic feet should be provided for each inhabitant; windows to be open for at least 4 hours a day (no doubt due to miasmatic concerns); males and females could not occupy the same sleeping compartment unless married; 'persons of bad character' could not be allowed to reside in the house; and a register of names of each lodger be kept. The strikers' position was that the regulations would lead to evictions, increase in housing costs, and harassment by police (Tsai 175-181).

<sup>14</sup> Chambers contrasts the corporeal city with the planned and rational city with its 'rigid logic of empty, homogenous time.'

As porous as this stone is the architecture. Building and action interpenetrate in the courtyards, arcades, and stairways. In everything they preserve the scope to become a theatre of new, unforeseen constellations. . . This is how architecture, the most binding, part of the communal rhythm, comes into being here: civilized, private, and ordered only in the great hotel and warehouse buildings on the quays; anarchical, embroiled, village-like in the centre. . . (Benjamin 1979: 169-70)

These writings belong to a vitalist tradition that pervades writing on cities and modernism. A similar vision of the interpenetration and excess of urban practices and spaces emerges in more social scientific guise in the case of Hong Kong. Frank Leeming, an urban geographer, wrote a study of early 1970s Hong Kong called *Street Studies in Hong Kong*. It describes in considerable detail the social ecology of Hong Kong, and typical localities in Hong Kong, building an account of urban porosity formed in terms of economic and spatial exigencies. Leeming (1977: 40) emphasised the role of built form and the generation of local manufacturing as a means of survival in a 'landscape of saturation'. *Street Studies* is an acute record of everyday spatiality of Chinese Hong Kong, capturing something of the texture of urban life and the close connection of urban spaces and practices. Leeming's focus was on both the micro scale of particular buildings and streets and on particular areas as representative of typical ecologies. Leeming divided the building types into just 7 main types of urban building.<sup>15</sup> What is striking about this typology of building types is the limited range of basic building types. (There is still this sense with contemporary building styles.) Leeming attributes this to the rapidity of the city's development, the limited supply of land, and the government's formidable powers of control exercised over the layout and dimensions of buildings (Leeming 1977: 18). Leeming characterises Hong Kong as a 'saturated' landscape – 'dense, versatile, cellular, predictable, repetitious, intensely human; a landscape charged with opportunity, tension, familiarity and risk' (Leeming 1977: 40). This set of adjectives captures a mixture of complexity and simplicity. There was simplicity and homogeneity in the 'cellular' patterns of built structures (particularly in older parts of

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<sup>15</sup> These were: tenement buildings, the main building type of most of Hong Kong until at least the 1960s; the forms of government housing built after 1955; office buildings then mainly confined to Central; residential apartment blocks typical of 'good residential sections'; and various temporary structures such as squatter housing and factories (Leeming 1977: 17).

Kowloon and Hong Kong Island) while there was great complexity in the local compression of multiple social interactions and uses of space.

The government had enormous formal control over the built environment, owning all land, setting conditions on all land leased, and exercising control over most physical aspects of building through ordinances. On the other hand this control over local practices was partial and ineffective: 'the city is crammed with anomalous and often illegal activities, many of them involving land use' (Leeming 1977: 18-19). Many practices escaped the limitations set by building and health regulations. Hong Kong building ordinances were primarily negative instruments, means of containment, which nevertheless exerted a powerful influence on the shape and scale of buildings.<sup>16</sup> These regulations rarely fulfilled their basic aims and only served to increase densities and internal crowding, given that they were not accompanied by substantial increases in the availability of land. Another effect of these regulations was to keep residential building forms more or less the same for nearly a century. It was not until 1955 that new building ordinances allowed construction of buildings of much greater volume – this was tailored to the introduction of the government housing blocks. The new ordinances allowed much bigger buildings than the old tenement blocks, and many larger commercial buildings sprang up, particularly along Nathan Road in Kowloon. These were complexes of shops and restaurants on the lower floors, a mix of workshops and factories, boarding houses, brothels and offices on the upper floors. These were basically much larger versions of *tong l'ou* buildings. Industrial workshops which had been squeezed into tenements became factories in mixed use buildings of 10-15 storeys, still let unit by unit (Leeming 1977: 87, 109). 1966 ordinances introduced controls of building scale based on plot ratio and site coverage. Factory buildings no longer had provision for residential use.

Hong Kong was undergoing a shift from the building traditions associated with the colonial entrepôt to a 'modern' planned city characterised by industrialisation, mass

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<sup>16</sup> The first Buildings Ordinance dates back to 1856, requiring buildings to have safe places for the lighting of fires and cooking. In response to plague around the turn of the century, ordinances in 1902-3 laid down the first minimum standards for steepness of stairs, flooring, and prohibited building of cubicles without windows. Up until 1935 the height of buildings was generally restricted to three storeys (Fong and Chan 1993: 14). Reforms in 1935 allowed buildings up to five storeys if constructed of fire resistant materials, while reducing the depth of buildings, a move designed to increase space and ventilation from windows (which still reflected miasmatic preoccupations) (Pryor

housing, more specialized land use and building forms. This was marked by changes in building style, from *tong l'oh* to western style buildings. But even in the early 1970s, half of all new buildings were in the *tong l'oh* style, with internal partitions that were not fixed and part of the structure. For Leeming (1977: 20), 'these tenements represent the physical, social and intellectual foundation of contemporary housing in Hong Kong'. I would suggest that *tong l'oh* buildings embodied generative practices that residually persist in contemporary Hong Kong. The spirit of the *tong l'ou* tenement, embodying flexibility and permutation, continues in the form of resistances to planning controls, such as cage housing, improvised building additions, all vernacular attempts to maximise space.<sup>17</sup> Elements of mixed usage, spatial flexibility, porosity and saturation remain features of Hong Kong life in spite of attempts to impose more comprehensive planning, and greater specialisation and separation of functions in planned spaces.

Hong Kong was undergoing a transition to a 'great manufacturing city with an important seaport and business side' (Leeming 1977: 8). For Leeming, the basis of Hong Kong's 'economic miracle' was in the industrious dispositions of the local Chinese to utilise every resource and space available for economic enterprise. This developmental leap was not based (at least initially) in the Weberian preconditions of specialisation, rationalisation and the separation of spheres, of work and home, but in Hong Kong's concentrated urban world, its dense built environment, and above all its intensity of practical improvisation. Leeming saw Hong Kong's 'natural' human landscape (his quote marks) as mixed and small scale:

(It scorns no economic opportunity, whatever its shape, size, content and implications; multiplicity of uses is central to it; its hallways are shops or kitchens, its staircases stores, its alleys sculleries; its kitchens are passageways and its flats factories; its factories double as sleeping and eating places, its shops as dining rooms, and its pavements as shops or workshops....a landscape of human symbiosis.'  
(Leeming 1977:19)

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1983: 21).

<sup>17</sup> The vernacular aspects of architectural resistance to Hong Kong building ordinances is celebrated by 'anarchist architect', Jerzy Wojtowicz. His *Illegal Facades* (1984) documents improvised structures augmenting high rise tenement buildings, such as balconies, cage additions, huts

Leeming's book now reads as a transitional study, written in a period of major change in Hong Kong's urban form. The city he detailed – the artisanal factory city – was already rapidly vanishing. Although evidence of it can still be seen, it has been subsequently overlaid with a vertical and partially decentralised city that developed from the 1960s. Beyond the artisanal city, Hong Kong's rapidly expanding economy has seen successive shifts of emphasis within a short time: from industrial concentration and rationalisation; then deindustrialisation as Hong Kong manufacturing capital increasingly moved its operations 'offshore' to Guangdong and other locations in China; to financial services, service industry, media and high-tech industry as part of the drive to establish and maintain Hong Kong's position as a global city.<sup>18</sup> Following Rayner Banham's analysis of Los Angeles, Cuthbert characterised Hong Kong as an overlay of 'four eroding ecologies' in which 'the merchant city, the industrial city, the financial city and the capital city have created colonial spaces with working-class conditions adjacent to commodity spaces with new towns and high rise buildings' (Cuthbert in Low 1996: 396).<sup>19</sup>

I have devoted considerable space to Leeming's study of built forms and lived space in Hong Kong in the period of the 1960s and early 1970s, partly because this was the time in which most of my informants were growing up. They have also witnessed subsequent dramatic transformations of Hong Kong's urban space. Leeming implies that a positive disposition towards the crowded artisanal city was based in essential 'Chinese' characteristics. I see this disposition more as 'virtue made of necessity', the operation of a collective habitus attuned to operating in difficult conditions.<sup>20</sup> Leeming gave little consideration to the emerging planning regimes that were already generating major changes in the production of space in Hong Kong. Much of the city he described has vanished. However I will argue that there are continuities between the specific practical sense developed in the age of colonial *laissez faire* and urban dispositions in contemporary Hong Kong.

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cantilevered into concrete walls, etc.

<sup>18</sup> On the industrial and investment expansion of Hong Kong into Guangdong as well as other parts of the PRC, see Henderson 1991, Yeung and Lo 1998 and Hall 1999.

<sup>19</sup> This recalls Lefebvre's conception of social space as coexistence of 'successive stratified and tangled networks'. Lefebvre (1991: 403) suggests something like an archaeological layering in which "no space disappears completely or is utterly abolished in the process of social development . . . something always survives or endures – 'something' that is not a *thing*."

## **2e. After the fires: planning and residential space**

The tension between *laissez-faire* and authoritarian policies hindered positive solutions to Hong Kong's housing problems. The administration mainly acted negatively, by setting limits on practices deemed to threaten public health. This was largely ineffective, since there was not the social integration of spheres of life that provides the potential to maximise administrative control over everyday practices. Planning was residual, focused on, firstly, the basic infrastructure for the operation of the port, and secondly, colonial symbolic and ceremonial sites – the administrative centre and other public (British) buildings that valorised British rule and order (e.g. Statue Square with its statue of Queen Victoria which was at the heart of the colonial city in front of the Hong Kong Shanghai Bank). The principle mechanism of control was the institutionalised scarcity of space exercised through the monopoly on land.

It was not until the mid 1950s that active planning intervention in lived space (as opposed to regulatory control by ordinance, and regulation of supply through the control over land releases) was implemented to directly benefit the mass of Hong Kong people. The colonial administration had developed extensive economic infrastructure, but had done little for the social infrastructure of the majority. War and revolution in China made the social situation untenable. The context for these changes was potential catastrophe. Some 750,000 refugees had arrived in Hong Kong following the invasion of China by Japan in 1937. Then the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong from 1941-45 saw the population fall to some 600,000. But the sudden return of those who had fled during the war to a city with severely damaged housing and infrastructure caused massive problems in housing, sanitation, and public safety. This was exacerbated by a further influx following the Chinese Revolution. Few cities have experienced such rapid growth – the first post-war census in 1961 put the population at 3.2 million (Fong & Chan 1993: 13-6). Prior to World War 2, almost all housing had been provided by the private market, albeit in circumstances of great congestion and lack of adequate sanitation. The post-war influx created a demand that could not hope to be met by private housing markets, with a resultant massive growth in squatter settlements on the urban periphery, and on boats. In fact, many

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<sup>20</sup> See Bourdieu 1984, chapter 7.

squatters were not refugees, or even necessarily the poorest workers. The post-war crisis exposed the inadequacy of the private housing market, underpinned by the government's monopoly on land.<sup>21</sup> Government control of land for housing development historically exacerbated housing shortages and produced high prices.<sup>22</sup> The lack of freehold land has been a constant factor in Hong Kong. As Alan Smart (1992: 25) put it: 'Although Hong Kong has been rather slow to comprehensively plan land-use, its ability to regulate the supply of land and to impose conditions upon leaseholds has made it possible for the government to critically influence urban development.' Smart argues that government land sales exacerbated the housing crisis, which was only resolved by state intervention in the public housing market from the 1950s. This undercuts the *laissez faire* version of Hong Kong history, in which crowding and poverty in Hong Kong could appear to be chaotic but 'natural', and squatters and refugees could be blamed as the illegitimate surplus population, a wild element. For Cuthbert (1986:20) monopoly of land by the state was (and still is) crucial to state 'development control' largely circumventing 'planning' as an arena of contestation.

The situation was dramatised in 1953 by fires in squatter camps in Shek Kip Mei, which destroyed the homes of some 53,000 people overnight. The administration responded by building the first 'resettlement estates'. The first estates ('Mark 1') were composed of six or seven storey 'H block' buildings, and living standards were minimal, and sometimes worse than the squatter housing they replaced. There were very small space allocations of 2.2 square metres per adult, no electricity or cooking facilities, and poor sanitation. It seems clear that the original motivation of the resettlement programs was not the welfare of the people housed. The government calculated that immediate relief was more expensive than building basic housing. The Commissioner for Resettlement put the government's position in 1955:

Squatters are not resettled simply because they need ...or deserve, hygienic and fireproof homes; they are resettled because the community can no longer afford to

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<sup>21</sup> The following figures show the increase in residential density over this period: The number of people per floor rose from 9.05 in 1934 to 16.5 in 1939 and 18.144 in 1950 to 19.597 in 1956 (Smart 1995:104).

<sup>22</sup> In the period from 1949-55, at the height of the refugee influx from the Chinese Revolution, government land releases for housing were minimal, despite the human costs of this land scarcity (A. Smart 1992: 28).

carry the fire risk, health risk, and threat to public order and prestige which the squatter areas represent and because the community needs the land of which they are in illegal occupation. And the land is needed quickly. (Hong Kong Commissioner for Resettlement, in Drakakis-Smith 1979: 44)

However, this crisis rehousing initiative was the (unintended) start of one of the most concentrated state sponsored urban housing programs, gradually transforming the housing market, the physical environment of Hong Kong, and the lived experience of Hong Kong. The massive scale of this production of residential space in Hong Kong accompanied the territory's growing economic prosperity and the rapid shifts from entrepôt port, to NIC, to global finance and service centre.<sup>23</sup>

The 1950s and early 1960s, was the period of resettlement estates – the emergency rehousing of squatters and displaced slum dwellers. Large numbers of people were housed at very minimal standards of amenity and living space. While these standards had somewhat improved by the mid 1960s by which time hundreds of thousands had been housed in resettlement estates, the overall housing situation was still unable to keep pace with the growth of squatter settlements, which housed over half a million, or 20% of the current population in 1964 (Castells et al 1990: 21). It was only with the more systematic programs of the 1970s that the housing market was 'normalised'. This entailed the development of 'new towns' away from the historic urban core centred around Victoria Harbour. Six major new towns – Tsuen Wan, Sha Tin, Tuen Mun, Yuen Long, Taipo and Fanling were projected to provide housing for some three million people (Pryor 1983: 73). Castells *et al* (1990: 152) argue that it was only in this period that the government housing strategies began to take on the characteristics of social reform. An increase of housing standards involved a long-term program of upgrading the older estates. The whole project entailed much more systematic long term planning. I cannot dwell further on political

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<sup>23</sup> There was no doubt a symbiotic relation between Hong Kong's economic growth and the state directed housing. This is not my concern here. For arguments from a perspective of political economy see, for instance Castells et al. 1990, Drakakis-Smith 1979, A. Smart 1992, and Cuthbert 1986, 1991. Drakakis-Smith (1979: 161) maintained that the overall economic viability of the colony was the administration's primary interest. 'The current benefits to the government are thus the same as those which have been sought since the housing program began – the release of land for development, tight control of metropolitan expansion insofar as it affects economic growth, and a politically stable population'. The gradual turn to 'social housing' was unintended but was found to fulfill these needs better than the 'laissez faire' approach to the housing market.

and planning aspects of housing policy since my interest here is on effects on the lived space in Hong Kong.

The extent of the changes over this period can hardly be overstated. With Hong Kong's economic growth and state interventions in housing and planning, the majority of people have experienced increased standards of living. Many of my informants have vivid memories of a more precarious ways of living:

More than fifty percent of the people were refugees. Of course they got nothing, or maybe just a little bit of money. So a lot of people are living somewhere in bad conditions. Then the government started to build a kind of small box for each family, yeah, with public toilets and public washing area, shared by more than twenty, maybe forty families, sharing the water supply in a big room, so the people do all their washing there, and also share that toilet, maybe ten cubicles.... My mother had to cook the food on a fire outside in the street.

This is not such an uncommon story. Despite the experience of poverty, most of my informants who grew up in the period of the 1950s to the 1970s have a sense of a continuity of material improvement, of upward mobility.<sup>24</sup>

At the moment we are lucky because we got three rooms. When I was young, I was in a very poor family, and eight of our family members had to live in a room which was only about 130 square feet. It's just a very small place.

People typically index their trajectories in terms of the precise square footage of living space. The attention given to measurement can seem comically excessive. Here my informants, a couple, are comparing their new flat in Sydney with the one they had occupied in Hong Kong:

T: In Hong Kong we never think that we can live in such a big area. (...) Unless you earn a lot of money, otherwise you can't afford to buy, or afford to rent such a house, such a unit. It's more than 1000 square feet.

P: So how big was the place you were living in?

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<sup>24</sup> James Lee's study of middle class homeowners' housing histories similarly shows a common childhood background of deprivation in housing provision and basic living conditions (Lee 1999: 131-

T: 700 square feet, 700. This one is bigger and also, this is the, you know the nett area, you know. But for a house in Hong Kong, there is the building area, you know. Because when you account for areas occupied by the wall, by the common area, all the things...so the actual area is only 80 percent.

P: So, it's a little bit bigger, maybe twenty percent bigger?

T: No, no, I think it's a hundred percent.

P: A hundred percent?

T: Yeah, you say one hundred times eighteen per cent, 560 square feet, but now it's 1,160. This is the net area.

A: In Hong Kong they mention this, it's the gross area.

T: Gross floor area.

A: They take into account everything.

P: They measure it differently, including the walls...

A: The lift lobby, everything.

It certainly can't be said that residential space is not important to Hong Kong people. This sort of quantification and comparison is common, especially when apartments are compared or new estates are discussed. People usually recall the precise area of all the places they had lived in.

The changing styles and conditions of government housing can be traced through characteristic building types. Building styles were generic and narrow in range, creating a sense of massive and patterned uniformity. This applies even to most private sector developments due to the centrally coordinated and regulated nature of urban development. Residential space, and gradually increasing standards both in terms of living space and amenities, was produced through increasing scale and verticality. Tower apartment block estates are now the dominant housing form in Hong Kong, and especially in the fully planned 'new town' areas. They give the appearance of uniformity, both in their internal design, the tower blocks with apartments distributed around central lift wells, and the massing of identical buildings in a single estate. Housing tends to be constructed in dense high rise estates involving large capital investments to maximise the economy of scale in

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developing relatively small releases of land. The massification of housing architecture has continued apace over the past forty years.<sup>25</sup>

Sullivan and Chen (1997: 298-303) make the point that the evolution of state built housing, while increasing overall space per person also decrease flexibility for 'tenant fitout'. In earlier models, tenants typically built their own internal partitions (movable or fixed), bunks, storage units and so on, a continuation of aspects of *tong l'ou* practices. Later housing models reduced or eliminated this element. In addition, more recent designs have moved to a greater modularization, with individual units more isolated from others. Flats were no longer lined along long hallways of rectangular structures, like earlier models. They now tend to be in small clusters, facing different directions, insulated visually and audibly from each other, emphasising a more private aspect.

There is a palpable difference between older estate housing and apartments built in the past decade. To illustrate the difference I compare two flats I stayed in: the first was in an 18 storey slab building in Ho Man Tin (Kowloon) built in the late 1960s and the second in a 35 storey block in Siu Sai Wan (Hong Kong Island) built in the early 1990s. The older apartment had a total area of 240 square feet, roughly 20 feet by 12. This was a basic rectangular box divided by homemade partitions, which created sleeping areas, a kitchen, bathroom, and a living area. At the far end of the rectangle was an enclosed 'balcony' with windows facing a courtyard and an identical block (there were no other windows or sources of light and ventilation). In one corner was the bathroom, a tiny cubicle of perhaps a metre square with a toilet bowl, hand held shower (no hot water), and buckets for washing clothes. I stayed in this flat for a short time with a friend and her father who were preparing to emigrate to Australia. The apartment had once housed a family of five. Still, I felt that

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<sup>25</sup> Slab blocks and H block housing were typical of the 1960s. The original blocks ('Mark 1') were seven stories with single rooms of about 11m<sup>2</sup> and shared kitchens and toilets. One planning historian has noted the similarity of the Indian *chawl* and early Hong Kong public housing (Home 1997: 103). Mark IV and V were 16 storey blocks with unit sizes between 21 and 33 m<sup>2</sup> designed for different household sizes. Taller H blocks and twin tower buildings of 18-27 storeys were built in the mid 70s. These had more self-contained units with their own bathrooms. Trident blocks, with their distinctive three-pronged wings, built to about 34 storeys, were the most common design in the 1980s. They were the first to have windows for natural light and ventilation in all sleeping and living areas. Harmony blocks, introduced in 1992, with their cruciform towers around 40 storeys had flat sizes of up to 85 m<sup>2</sup> and featured more fixed layouts, with 'built' walls, rather than internal partitions (Fong and Chan 1993: 125-8; Sullivan and Chen 1997: 292-5).

someone was always within a few feet of me, although the flat was organised to provide the maximum privacy under the circumstances. The apartment was highly organised and densely arranged, with intricate home-made shelving and cupboards, an altar, a study area with computer table and a folding table which was used for eating, games of mahjong and numerous other purposes, since every other area had a dedicated purpose. There were numerous small traces of Australia – an Opera House clock, framed family photos taken with Sydney Harbour Bridge in the background, books by Colleen McCulloch and Henry Lawson. This apartment carried the distinct stamp of its occupants, since every aspect of its internal construction was self-built around specific needs, means and tastes. The sense of others in close proximity was always there. Walking along the long corridors of the block you could often see into other apartments, hear neighbours' sounds, and smell their cooking through ubiquitous steel grate security doors.

The feeling of apartments in newer estate buildings seems quite different. One aspect is the scale of development. The estate at Siu Sai Wan consisted of 12 'cruciform' tower blocks of about 35 storeys, compared to the three buildings of the estate in Kowloon. By no means a large estate by local standards, it probably houses over 20,000 people. The building did not have the long corridor spaces of slab blocks. In 'point blocks', the apartments radiate out from the central lift wells, so front entrances are in small clusters at the end of short passageways extending from the 'service core'. Contact with immediate neighbours is rare. There is total visual privacy from passers-by, and aural spill is quite minimal compared to the long corridors of slab blocks. (Perhaps the most pervasive sense-data is the smells of food and Chinese herbs wafting up from the kitchens stacked below on the same arm of the building.) The apartments were substantially larger, about 600 square feet in area, clearly (permanently) divided into rooms – two bedrooms, kitchen, bathroom, a dining area and sitting area. Well lit by natural light, with windows in every room, this apartment form apes that of the detached house in miniature, albeit suspended on the 29<sup>th</sup> floor. The apartment seemed small but 'adequate' for the family of three living there, although I was struck by the sparseness and blankness of this flat and others like it I had seen. There were expanses of white walls with little adornment or personalising clutter. My feeling was that people hadn't yet learned to live in these home spaces. (Or could it be that I spent time in the homes of emigrants, whose

domestic space reflected a sense of transience?) There is a sharp contrast with older apartments whose the internal structures were often built by the occupants. These tightly nested spaces seemed almost an extension of the bodies of its inhabitants. The 'lived in' feeling of these older dwellings is perhaps related to the 'home-made' nature of the dwellings, which always perfectly reflected the practical life and domestic arrangements and 'solutions' of a particular household. Am I romanticising the older estates? No one who has actually lived in them does.

Attempts to assess social effects of these changing residential environments are not particularly persuasive. Commentators have simply made assertions about the drabness (Lo 1992: 167) or anonymity (Abbas 1997: 85) of social housing since the 1950s. Various social science studies of 'neighbourliness' in Hong Kong attempt to relate housing architecture to the generation of neighbourly contacts. One study points to differences in social relations and neighbourly practices depending on the main building types people lived in. Comparing slab blocks, Trident blocks, and point blocks, Yip found that the long corridors of the slab blocks were the most frequent site of neighbourly exchanges, whereas the main point of intersection in point blocks was in the lift lobbies at the bottom of the buildings. Slab blocks were found to be generally more 'neighbourly' in terms of more frequent greetings and conversational exchanges, with point blocks being the least open to exchanges between neighbours (Yip 1989: 53-6). Kan (1978) also showed that the built spaces of housing estates offer different opportunities for social contact. Her research grouped thousands of observed 'neighbourly' acts, from casual greetings to more intensive cooperation and friendship. The close proximity of the early resettlement blocks with shared facilities and very small housing units offered more contact and mutual knowledge of each other's habits, and consequently less privacy than later more self contained housing. But Kan's conclusion was that spatial conditions were not in themselves a determinant of more intensive relationships or networks when controlled for other variables such as length of residence (Kan 1978: 172-3). These studies suggest that while buildings physically channel everyday interactions and provide specific spatial locales, we can hardly impute forms of sociality to the internal space of buildings since these derive from social fields apart from residential

propinquity.<sup>26</sup> In addition, working with normative conceptions of sociality like ‘neighbourliness’ may lead to overlooking the more complex ‘grain’ of lived experience in rapidly changing habitats.

## **2f. Specificities of planned space in Hong Kong**

On a wider scale than that of buildings and estates, we would expect that the ascent of planning would result in more specialized, homogenised environments. Hong Kong’s new-towns were new and totally planned urban environments which, despite their much greater density and verticality, were based on the model of British new-towns. Large-scale new town planning models have generally been based on principles of zoning and the separation of functions. Bristow, in an orthodox physical planning history of the new-towns, states that in Hong Kong there was ‘a realisation that single-use zones were impractical’. A looser form of planning practice seems to have emerged in which ‘three dimensional planning’ would allow for ‘a greater degree of vertical integration of urban functions which ... already exists in a haphazard form in many districts.’ Here Bristow (1989: 234) was directly citing the Colony Outline Plan document of 1969. Bristow implies that there was some transfer of the practical sense of Hong Kong – exemplified by the shophouse tradition – into the planning of new town areas. The ‘bustling, uncontrolled, multifarious activity’ of the urban centres could replace the ‘order and uniformity’ of the new-town conceptions – shades of Leeming’s saturation. Bristow, like Leeming, attributes this disposition to a ‘Chinese’ underpinning of western planning traditions. Culture, or the continuance of a certain way of doing things, comes ‘from below’ to subtly alter planning practices. For instance, elsewhere he refers to the hawker ‘problem’ that ‘haunted the planning and management of early housing estates all over Hong Kong’ (Bristow 1989: 257).<sup>27</sup> In a sense hawkers (and their customers) practically provided a ‘critique’ by pointing to the needs and desires that were not met by the legitimate retail market and the planned facilities of residential areas.

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<sup>26</sup> Perhaps those with the least social capital, or access to extended networks, will rely most on relations of propinquity.

<sup>27</sup> They still haunt the authorities. Smart reported that 3800 illegal hawkers had been identified as

Planned spaces produced in the past 25 years have in many ways continued to enable ‘multifarious activity’ by closely linking functional spaces. Large scale planning from the 1970s has frequently featured a high degree of integration of residential and non residential features – e.g. retail, transport nodes and entertainment, are often combined in interlocking spaces. The world of the street has been overlaid with other levels of connection in a three dimensional web. Shopping malls commonly form passageways between railway stations and residential towers. Hong Kong malls form a clear contrast between those in North America, where malls are generally discrete structures physically isolated from the surrounding city and existing street life. (Crawford 1992: 3-30) Crawford sees the ‘mall’ of America similarly as an alienating, displacing and de-vitalizing strategy that is becoming dominant in the United States. But what is a mall? This American critique does not seem appropriate to Hong Kong. American malls, commonly built on the edges of cities or towns, disconnected from pedestrian or public transport access, are built around car access. In Hong Kong there was never room for retail centres on the periphery which would undermine or displace existing centres. Shopping complexes in Hong Kong sometimes resemble the labyrinthine collections of shops and restaurants to be found near hubs such as railway stations in Tokyo and other large Japanese cities (Clammer 1992: 200-01). Hong Kong malls, often directly connected to residential towers, public transit nodes and other civic spaces, do not rely on automobile access and appear to connect rather than to fragment and disrupt pedestrian practices.

This description of the Tuen Mun town centre plan, approved in 1979, could stand for many subsequent town centre and estate developments integrating various features and functions using the technology of massive concrete podia connecting buildings, and overhead walkways:

Linked to the central commercial complex a system of overhead walkways were separate podia structures with residential towers above: the whole circulation system now being integral at third floor level. The podia roofs were generally designed as landscaped recreational and open space-areas. There was also a separate ground-level pedestrian network to allow linkages to adjacent housing areas and to the town’s public transport system. (Bristow 1989: 255)

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working in the housing estates of the single district of Kwun Tong (J. Smart 1989: 38).

The integration of lived space is primarily accomplished through pedestrian activity and public transport. The ownership of a private car is still a minority aspiration, or rather a still impractical aim for the majority.<sup>28</sup> Hence walking and negotiating public transport is the primary means of experiencing and orienting one's position in the city. This is a major difference compared to car-dominated cities such as Sydney.

Pedestrian footbridges, tunnels, arcades, podium spaces, escalators, and elevators are engineered devices to integrate walkers into the massively verticalised spaces that have emerged in Hong Kong in recent years. Pedestrian passageways are not necessarily socially neutral, since some users may be privileged and others denied access. Some urbanists have been critical of the social effects attributed to pedestrian structures. They have argued that in US cities there is an increasing segregation of the streets from more privatised spaces, such as malls and pedestrian walkways. Boddy sees the North American underground and overhead pedestrian walkways (or 'urban prosthetics') as segregated, stratifying and disciplinary. The street has been abandoned to automobile use and to those socially marginalised on the grounds of race and class, who are increasingly exposed to violence and the exigencies of impoverished environments (Boddy 1992: 124-5).<sup>29</sup> While this analysis raises questions of differential access and closure of 'public' space, it also points to differences between different urban spatial orders. Firstly, the dominance of the private car is not so apparent in Hong Kong. Also, it does not appear that street life has been peripheralised in the way that Boddy suggests of US cities where 'new bridges and tunnels continue the same architectural order, and with them, the same socioeconomic order, between blocks'. (Boddy 1992: 125) Because spatial practices are more mixed within the highly concentrated locales of Hong Kong, there does not seem to be the same segregation of transport uses (and users).

Older parts of Hong Kong retain lively street spaces, a relentlessly commercial environment with shops on the ground floor of almost all buildings with street

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<sup>28</sup> The number of licensed cars private cars was under 300,000 in 1996 (Hong Kong Government 1997: 476).

<sup>29</sup> There is a venerable tradition of asserting the natural, original communicability of the (ground level) street and its egalitarian potential, and conversely bemoaning the loss of 'peopled public space'. For classic statements see Jane Jacobs 1961 and Sennett 1976.

frontage. Commercial life spills onto the street area, often with merchandise of all kinds spread on the sidewalk. This is augmented by many street markets and hawkers stalls. This kind of streetscape, an updated version of the shophouse quarters, is a quite different environment to the massive multi-tower housing estates which are the dominant form of new residential development, especially in new town areas. Towers on a typical new estate development are usually linked by a giant concrete podium which forms a base for above-ground pedestrian spaces, gardens, sporting and leisure spaces.<sup>30</sup> Advertising for these estates often feature landscaped ‘theme-gardens’, tennis courts and swimming pools, and even ‘country clubs’ with sauna rooms, all built on the expanses of concrete podium between tower buildings. This has had implications for the kind of amenities Hong Kong people have access to, compared to the recent past.<sup>31</sup> However, these facilities tend to be more available to private owners than public housing tenants.

The planned production of Hong Kong space over the past 25 years has resulted in very different urban spaces from that of the old Hong Kong. I have argued that there are considerable continuities with the ‘saturated landscape’ of the older areas of Hong Kong. I have traced some continuities and disjunctions between Hong Kong spaces emerging over historical time. While it has not been feasible to explore Hong Kong’s spatial history in exhaustive detail, I have introduced some aspects of Hong Kong’s built space which are salient to the understanding of the spatial practices and habituations of migrant subjects .

## **2g. Chapter conclusion**

In tracing Hong Kong’s development from an explicitly spatial perspective, I have pointed to some of the dynamics that underpin contemporary urban life in Hong Kong. Traces of earlier colonial history can be found in the city as it is now. The structure of the city with its merchant town and administrative core built around the

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<sup>30</sup> The degree of additional open space can be gauged by the giant Mei Foo Sun Chuen development, with 100 tower blocks, in which podium areas comprised 411,593 square feet, some 22% of open space (Chan Kit Chu 1993: 66).

<sup>31</sup> Until recently there was extremely limited access to open space or recreational activities. In 1984, ‘minimum standards’ for open space provision in urban areas was 15 hectares per 100,000 people, or 1.5 square metres per person. Even these minimal standards were nowhere near being met in the

harbour is still in evidence despite major changes in political and economic structures. The parallel development of the British and Chinese cities conditioned the cultural territories still to be found today. The dense mixture of uses exemplified in the 'shophouse' milieu can be found in mutated form in contemporary buildings and street environments. The 'corporeal city' can be sensed in Hong Kong street life in spite of the impacts of rational planning and urban policy. On the other hand, the emergent spaces of planned mass housing and satellite urban centres in the New Territories has produced urban spaces 'decentred' from the old core areas of Hong Kong Island and Kowloon. At the same time they embody some of the features of density, mixed usages, the close proximity of diverse commodities and services, the sources of a different sense of urbanity. They are certainly not suburban spaces: perhaps we could describe them as decentred centrality. The dramatic upheavals generated by systematic urban planning and mass housing over the past forty years have been experienced very directly by my informants, conditioning their sense of trajectory and expectations for the future.

An overlay of emergent and 'eroding' ecologies coexist in Hong Kong – elements of different histories and ways of being. At the same time there is a constant labour of representation that attempts to pull aspects of diverse local spaces together into a naturalised and seamless urban 'imaginary'.<sup>32</sup> The hardworking money-making *entrepôt* is still the dominant representation, albeit presented in a globalist rather than colonial form. The relentless repetition of images of the Central skyline to symbolise the concentration of corporate and financial power continues the envisioning of the 'face of the island' as emporium.

In this chapter I have attempted to synthesise some elements of the complex spatial production which is Hong Kong. The format of a linear 'history' supplies a necessary temporal dimension to go beyond a simple description of urban features. This chapter provides some context in which to understand the relation between the

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most crowded older areas such as Wanchai (Ho 1984: 11).

<sup>32</sup> I am relating the attempt to envision the city as a whole to the operation of the imaginary in Lacanian psychoanalysis in which the imaginary 'I' is based around the specular image of the child's body as an ideal image of wholeness and unity. This naturalising and homogenising of the spatial imaginary occurs at many levels – from that of the individual subject to collective representations of a place such as a city and the nation. For an attempt to relate Lacanian theory to urban space see Pile (1996: 137-42).

making of Hong Kong's space, and the habits and spatial dispositions of contemporary Hong Kong subjects. The ordinary practices of Hong Kong dwellers have been as important in 'producing' the space of the city as the actions of planning and spatial regulation. The practical logic of Hong Kong people has been adapted through experience and immersion in a singular urban space. A certain attunement to the 'saturated' quality of the city is manifested in a taste for the conditions in which these dispositions were formed. Some key features of this spatial environment I discussed include: the city's density, the porosity and interpenetration of different spatial uses, the increasing verticality and three-dimensionality of spaces, the crisis in the housing market, general improvements accompanying mass public housing, and rapid change in the built environment.

In order to develop an understanding of the spatial dimensions of migration, it is necessary to examine more closely the 'spatial practice' of contemporary Hong Kong dwellers. The next chapter will deal more specifically with everyday spatial practices and dispositions in Hong Kong. It centres on a more detailed analysis of the lived spatiality of a small part of Hong Kong's New Territories in order to generate a more nuanced understanding of some everyday dimensions of spatial experience. Only then will we have an adequate basis for understanding accounts of how subjects deal with the 'collision' between differing urban spaces of Hong Kong and Sydney.