

The evolution of an urban model - tolerated spaces as effect of control

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Abstract

By applying the phenomenological research approach of the ETH STUDIO-BASEL, the general framework of the essay tries to examine the very specific urbanity of HK as a result of its complex political and economic background and motives. Despite the general consideration that globalisation and its rampant energies are producing a homogenisation of the urban conditions today (or what Koolhaas calls the *Generic city*) - a concept that could easily be applied with HK as one of its protagonists - the city of Hong Kong developed a highly sophisticated evolutionary urban model that created a very unique mode of urbanisation. The essay tries to sketch an understanding of the complex character of that governing economic model that strives for maximisation of efficiency and perfection and tries to explore its complex mechanisms and the roles of its various actors. This will be portrayed by means of an investigation in the *public transport and infrastructure system* of HK, that functions as a concordance between the HKSAR Government and private (transportation) companies to generate profit through real-estate developments. The question of whether this highly *specific* all-encompassing governance model with its main goal to gain economical profit in turn creates ‚niches of state-tolerated grey zones‘ as its side product shall be formulated with the examination on the case study of the *Chungking Mansions* as a possible model of such an alternative.

The content for the proposed lecture is based on a Research Project, conducted by the ETH STUDIO BASEL – Contemporary City Institute under the guidance of Prof. Marcel Meili, Prof. Roger Diener, Dr. Christian Schmid, Milica Topalovic and myself. The project was carried out in collaboration with the Chinese University of Hong Kong CUHK and the support of Prof. Hendrik Tieben and Prof Nelson Tam. Certain excerpts in the lecture are taken from the student projects of Marcel Jäggi und Jacob Jansen on ‘Chungking Mansions’ and Manuel Gut and Chaspar Schmidlin on ‘Infrastructure as Urban generator’.

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1 Introduction

Urban Switzerland

In comparison with Hong Kong, Switzerland comprises about four times the total surface of the territory of Hong Kong while having more or less the same amount of inhabitants at the same time. Despite the fact that about one fourth of its territorial surface is uninhabitable, this depicts a lot about the 'urban' perception of Switzerland: The Swiss urban condition is a mirror of its complex federal socio- political structure as important constituent of its 'direct democratic' system: Twenty-six cantons (districts) and two-thousand-seven-hundred municipalities from which each has its own political autonomy create a very intricate urban amalgam of high *specificity*. The condition of an extremely wealthy 'upper middle class' that fosters a continuously rising individualisation of the society based on the model of the small family (the dream of a privately owned home with garden is the ultimate goal) combined with this complex convoluted governing structure of state – cantons - and municipalities, generates a dense tissue of urbanisation: every single village is connected with public infrastructure, every single municipality possesses its own school, gym hall or theatre, every single city claims for its own football stadium and airport.

Switzerland: an Urban Portrait - Research on the urban condition of Switzerland

The ambition to understand this briefly sketched 'urban condition' of Switzerland was one of the principal motives for the formation of the ETH STUDIO-BASEL in 1999 as an urban research institute of the ETH Zurich. Despite the fact that urbanity in Switzerland - or what a city comprehends - is generally speaking rather suppressed than aspired, the Studio established the Hypothesis that Switzerland has to be conceived as a truly urbanised condition: a condition without the 'general view of differentiation' between city and countryside - a whole territory that underwent a mutual urban-transformation-process almost apart of being noticed by its inhabitants. In a time in which contemporary cities – due to the forces of globalisation are becoming more and more un-differentiable and generic, the ETH STUDIO BASEL book and research on Switzerland was concurrently an attempt to formulate the position that despite, or better 'coexistent' to the homogenizing processes, globalisation is also emphasizing specific patterns of urbanisation. To understand these patterns, the studio developed a series of analytical and theoretical tools within the process of the research.

The theoretical framework of the research on the urban condition of Switzerland was based on the comprehensive theoretical understanding of a complete urbanisation of the society by the French sociologist and urban geographer Henri Lefebvre (1901-1991). From his major oeuvre *the production of space (La production de l'espace 1974)* in which Lefebvre drew a complex analysis of space as a social construction that affects various social practices and hence urbanisation per se, the terminologies of *network, borders and differences* were derived. With the instrument of mapping as analytical and in the same time 'projective media', these terminologies or categories were continuously developed and supplemented over five years via the conducted researches of about a hundred and sixty students and resulted in the so called thesis map that defined five different typologies of urbanisation within the Swiss territory: *metropolitan regions, urban networks, quiet zones alpine fallow lands and the resorts*.

The Urban Portrait of Switzerland has to be conceived as a phenomenological approach, an essayistic combination between analyses and design. Very unique phenomena are examined via the Method of the so-called ‘drill’, in order to reveal layers of various linkages (political, sociological economical) and to describe rigorously the modalities of physical transformation in different environments and contexts. The particular modality is developed in the work with the students and makes no separation between teaching, fieldwork, design and research.

Why Hong Kong?

The materialisation of Koolhaas’ Generic City?

After this extensive five-year study on the Swiss ‘urbanity’ the ETH STUDIO BASEL started a research program on processes of transformation in the urban domain on an international scale, focusing on the urbanization processes that shape international cities toward their own ‘specific urban-logic’ while being affected simultaneously with the ‘generic’ homogenisation effect of globalisation.

The case of Hong Kong as one of the first studies on international cities, awakened Studio Basel’s interest exactly because of its role as a global city – ambiguously embedded between its hub-position as an international financial centre and trading place, and a governed system of state-control - a combination that has produced a highly unique urban form over at least fifty to sixty years.

This ambivalent condition of HK can be seen on the one hand as very generic due to its repercussions connected with the dominant global presence of the international capital, while on the other hand also as very specific because its unique historical development, topographical condition and geo-political situation. This simultaneity of ‘the generic and the specific’ is a coupling that evokes highly interesting questions: do they entail each other? How far are they interdependent? To what extent does a ‘specific’ urban condition based on its local legacy interact with its pendant, the all-encompassing ‘generic-ness’ produced by energies of globalisation?

In his provocative and ambiguous essay (*SMLXL 1995*), Rem Koolhaas describes *the Generic City* as a city - exported through instantaneous communications, knowledge, and culture – that is the efficient and pragmatic product arising from the remains of ‘what was once the city’.

Although it might be theoretically true that Koolhaas’ scheme is applicable to every city exactly because of its ‘generic content’, many of his articulations are astonishing because of their highly accurate descriptions related to the context of HK.

The enormous energy invested in the economic development of the city generates a relentless pressure to tear down and build anew to the point where Hong Kong’s ‘self-image’ its collective-memory, and its unique lifestyle are at risk. Koolhaas describes this moment rightly as the point where history is becoming so meaningless that the “regret about history’s absence is a tiresome reflex” and the conclusion that “a city is a plane inhabited in the most efficient way by people and processes, and in most cases, the presence of history only drags down its performance” depicts the present situation of HK in a surprisingly precise manner. For him the generic city is an urban phenomena that

tends to be located “in a warmer than usual climate, it is on its way to the south – toward the equator – away from the mess that the north made of the second millennium...its ultimate destiny is to be tropical”. Many ‘characteristic’ categories such as the skyscraper, that “looks as if it will be the final, definitive typology”, the Airport, the shopping mall are in some or the other way directly transferable to the model of HK. “Infrastructures” he writes, which were mutually reinforcing and totalizing, are becoming more and more competitive and local; They no longer pretend to create functioning wholes but now spin off functional entities. Instead of network and organism, the new infrastructure creates enclave and impasse...”

The Engineered Territory

Despite or because of these convincing arguments that ‘the generic’ became the only reality of our contemporary global urban condition - a yet abstract and conceptual model for which HK seems to be the perfect embodiment – the STUDIO BASEL already did a first attempt in 2004 with the ambition to turn these considerations ‘upside down’. A series of idiosyncratic and on first sight thematically independent researches or drills were formulated to reveal and cover a comprehensive urban portrait on HK’s specific urban condition. Among others, especially the research on HK’s land reclamation process, the high sophistication and parameters set by the public housing development and its unique typologies due to the changes of policies, demographic- and economic shifts, the artificial slope construction and fixation against landslides of the topography and the *Kowloon Hills* with its highly ingenious facilitation of infrastructure provoked already very interesting speculations and questions. Which forces are the motives for the very assertive, pragmatic involvement of the government in generating efficiency and quantity? What could be the model that generates this particular urbanity?

These questions, extracted from the enigmatic facets of the 2004 urban portrait of HK were the main motives for the second engagement of the Studio-Basel with HK’s urbanity in the last semester, with the attempt to cover a larger picture of the various energies which are shaping the urban transformation processes and to understand the relationship between the involvement of the government, economic players, private developers and other participating actors.

Whilst the Studio-Basel is examining urban research in international cities, which due to their geo-political and economic circumstances generated various levels of informal urban qualities, here the research focus is exactly given to the fact that HK has gradually developed a highly formal and controlled urbanity over approximately the last fifty years.

A terminology that in this respect became increasingly used within the discussions of the studio was the concept of *the engineered territory* - the system of a highly organised, planned and controlled governance of the territory. A sophisticated urban transformation model, a machine that aims towards its perfection through the achievement of a maximised efficiency by gradually combining and accumulating its previously developed expertise of ‘urban devices’. *Li Shiqiao* described this phenomenon in a recently published article *the cathartic city* in the German architecture magazine *StadtBauwelt (StadtBauwelt 175)* as being related to the issue of specialisation and expertise: that over the years “Hong Kong accepted the credibility of expert knowledge without condition. Hong Kong

amalgamates expert knowledge: those related to the fastest way to build a mega-development, the best way to make a profit with the largest margin, the fastest system of travel, the largest manoeuvring space within the framework of legitimacy, etc. The result has been a city with amazing efficiency and vibrancy.”

The rise of an urban model

Manuel Castells already ascertained this development in his broad study on the relationship of public housing policies and economical improvement with the case of HK and Singapore (*the Shek Kip Mei Syndrome – Economic Development and Public Housing in Hong Kong and Singapore, Pion Limited 1987*). Castels identified the famous fire of the squatter settlement of Shek Kip Mei in 1953 that left 50’000 people homeless as a key-moment in the urban history of HK. This major accidental event triggered a bureaucratic and political dynamic that led to significant changes in the public housing policy and was accompanied with a series of sanctions, (i.e. hygiene and fire regulations) which have become the most explicit shaping forces for future developments in Hong Kong. By analysing the mechanism of the relationship between the state, economic development and public policy Castells and his colleagues argued that there is a “positive interaction between economic development and public housing, and more broadly, between the role of ‘collective consumption’ (housing, urban infrastructure, social services) and the process of production and capital accumulation”. By providing basic social stability since the early 1970s that enabled and ensured a proper production of labour and simultaneously enabled the rising entrepreneurial population to take risks in business made steady growth and economic improvement possible. Shek Kip Mei is considered as key moment in the ‘modern urban development’ of Hong Kong because it ‘heralded’ the underlying economic motivation behind the urban development processes. As Castells explains, it was actually cheaper to build six-storey high resettlement blocks of very low standards than to pay relief fund to 50’000 people for two weeks. The fire was in that sense the perfect reasoning for the government to resettle the illegal squatter areas and to clear the now vacant land for new developments. Since in capitalist HK the government largely owns the land, the public housing development and later the new towns have provided key financial resources to the government, which it has used to create the necessary infrastructure for growth without having to resort to heavy direct taxation that would have undermined the business climate. The system, based on the two simple but vital interests - trade and land - was already established by the colonial occupation through the British since 1841 and further inherited by the city’s postcolonial Chinese elite. The basic principle of ‘offering’ a place for free trade, whilst simultaneously using the scarcely existing resources of buildable land as main sources for revenues, is a very simple logic that gradually adopted very sophisticated mechanisms.

The events and aftermath of the new economic sanctions introduced by Deng Xiaoping in the late seventies and early eighties that strangely enough simultaneously coincided with the ‘global shift announcing the success story of the neo-liberal project’, subsequently lead to a gradual involvement of the private sector in Hong Kong since the mid eighties and the beginning of the nineties. It is exactly the moment when the private housing market increases (due to the growing wealth of the rising middle-class or so-called ‘sandwich society’ as consequences to HK’s economical success) when Castells and his collaborators finalize their study that proposes an “economic model interpretative of

Hong Kong's growth in which industrial production, capital accumulation and collective consumption are inextricably related in a series of positive linkages". Meanwhile many aspects of this model have mutated toward higher economic efficiency, others have completely changed its modes, and additional energies and forces were added to culminate in a mechanism of high complexity. The gradual refined development and growing interdependence of the different factors responsible for the urban transformation process in Hong Kong (i.e. infrastructure, land management, housing policies, and economic production/services) with a subsequent involvement of private actors while the government to a large extent 'keeps control' (HKSAR own 76% shares of the newly privatized MTR/KRC) affirms one of the main assessments of that essay that these energies eventually culminated in a sort of 'hybrid model' comprising of all those criteria.

One of the initial research projects conducted and formulated by the studio Basel addressed the role of public transport and infrastructure planning strategy as a key player in the urban transformation process, with the ambition to explore and understand its complex mechanisms and actors involved in that process. Since the increasing participation of private development and the halting of the land reclamation projects due to environmental reasons certainly affected the urban development practices, it seems that the 'system of generating urban development through a public transport network' became the only valuable principle.

3 What is the Hong Kong model today?

Infrastructure and public transport as an urban generator

The research analyses the various economic, geographic and demographic conditions that evolved into the current system of public transport and formulates the hypothesis, that the direct relationship between infrastructure and property development conducted by the government and in concordance with MTRC and private developers eventually led toward a new and profitable urban and architectural typology, highly specific to Hong Kong: the *infrastructure-node* (or mega structure) as an instrument to generate high land value through accessibility and high density of vertically organised programmes. The typological architectural features that the steadily developed economical model implies are examined by means of the analyses of the project for *Lohas Park* - a station of the Tseung Kwan o Line currently under construction - as the ultimate embodiment of this typology and development. Accompanied with the urban developments in the new territories and the subsequent introduction of the public transport infrastructure, the performance of the network station and their relationship with the urbanised areas underwent a continuous transformation: the 'network-node' developed from a 'simple railway-station toward an independent concentration of a 'complete' city-part.

This gradual evolution of the node-typologies evolved within about thirty to forty years along with the construction of the different metro lines from a fully 'city-integrated' metro station - expanding horizontally into the city fabric - toward an 'isolated and self-sufficient super-node' comprising of various concentrated programs.

This vertical concentration and organisation of the node is highly attractive to private developers and its inhabitants, due to its setting within the station. The so-called podium on top of the station allows relative flexibility in the

arrangement of the housing towers, while offering various additional integrated programs to its dwellers. This nucleus of the node is not yet lucrative for the government; the railway company MTRC is basically financing the massive infrastructural features of a station via the directly linked private developments and commercial programs. In a long term perspective the area in a radius of around 400m walking distance to the station is becoming very attractive land for additional private development and hence generates the main revenues for the government. The MTRC, that is basically a private corporation with 76% share owned by the government, propagating here the so-called win-win-win situation from which all the three main actors take ostensibly a financial benefit. Obviously the question appears; which part of the society is disadvantaged by this highly capitalist accumulation process?

The very complex and iterative station development-process of about 20 to 30 years starts with the decision of the government for a new metro/railway line that is elaborated together with the MTRC. A master-plan, based on the governmentally implemented zoning plan, builds the basis for the a joint-venture agreement between MTRC and private developers. After the payment of the land-premium to the government, the private developer continues with the planning execution phase, while simultaneously starting an extensive real-estate marketing campaign. This complicated long-term process was successively examined within the research project by looking at the case study of *Lohas Park*, a condensed and isolated 'city-island' currently under construction, which will provide accommodation for about 50'000 inhabitants in the near future.

Despite the high sophistication of that development model, this system implies also critical aspects. The network of nodes that functions almost autonomously and disconnected from the rest of the city can be considered almost as a city within a city, that in many of the recent built 'mega-structures' entails a high level of exclusion. Various borders and levels of demarcations are appearing between the node-network and the existing city but also within the node itself. This combination of borders, proximity to the station and high density in relation to land value generates a sort of interiorised spatial condition that is continuously expanding.

The question arises whether this model conversely produces alternative spaces, quasi black spots that are unnoticed by the 'liberal-control attitude' of the government or conditions that are simply tolerated, perhaps even consciously letting passed through the 'filter of formal control'.

4 Tolerated grey zone – blind spot or alternative model?

Chungking Mansions – 'cultural condenser' and trading place for low-end globalisation

The research on *Chungking Mansions* was again driven by the ambition of understanding the various energies and forces that are shaping such a highly concentrated social space. Although *Chungking Mansions* is - obviously well known - a very popular research-field mainly in social analysis, the aim of the studio here was to understand how the various architectural and urban conditions are causing a relation with the social and economical habits inherent to that place.

The initial question of the research into how the multiple minorities of Hong Kong appropriate and occupy urban

spaces in respect to their social behaviours and cultural backgrounds is built into the framework for this project. The work further explores the various influences and histories from its local environment, Tsim Sha Tsui to a global scale, which has produced the numerous myths and urban legends around this high-density mega structure that finally generated its own 'brand'. These myths about *Chungking Mansions* where to a large extent originated in the irresponsibility of its various owners that caused several security problems such as numerous devastation fires. Constructed in 1962 as one of the first 'podium-typologies', the building, which originally consisted of large high-end private dwellings for the upper class, went through a rapid deterioration due to its multiple ownerships where each owner could do as he pleased. The building, which is basically composed from a three storey high plinth and three towers on top of about 15 storeys each, entails more than 200 shops in the first two floors and about 480 units in the towers that derived from the original 180 luxury-units.

This auto-transformation from a high-end place to a trading place and 'harbour' for the different immigrants and ethnic-minorities due to its immediate urban context, an architectural structure that allows a 'souk-like' market hall, and the liberal immigration policies of the HKSAR, forms a highly interesting mutation.

Since the building management changed in 2000 the dangerous situations concerning fire hazard has been highly improved. The management that is basically appointed by the 920 owners of *Chungking Mansions* is also responsible for monitoring maintenance, and for basic improvements to the building. Despite the fact that the management has to collaborate with the HK authorities and police concerning security control, this is in many ways carried out by its various shop owners and stakeholders. It seems that the organisation of the building developed its own self-regulated controlling and governing system with its own rules and restrictions – almost a sort of mutual and emancipated democratic agreement between its various owners and users – the building developed its own codes.

Regarding the long tradition and legacy of HK as a free place for trade that always fostered economic engagement and entrepreneurship, one can comprehend the role of *Chungking Mansions* as an alternative to the official Hong Kong's role as a global financial and trading centre. The very liberal Visa-policy of HK – about 170 countries are Visa-free – is of high relevance for a global city that needs to be continuously competitive by offering a fast exchange of people, information's and goods This liberal attitude of the government, combined with the 'tradition' of segregation of social classes and ethnic minorities in HK and the Tsim Sha Tsui area as well as its appearance as a trading and market place, offered in the *Chungking Mansions* a highly attractive location for a continuous fluctuation of various immigrants.

The assessment that this highly complex 3-dimensional amalgamation of social interactions generates a low-end-globalisation trading place, serving as exchange-hub for an 'informal' international trade of goods between developing countries in southeast Asia and Africa was established as one of the main thesis of that work.

The laissez-faire and non-interventionist attitude on the part of the government regarding trade activities offers extensive spaces that are eventually exploited in different ways in Hong Kong. *Chungking Mansions* is becoming a sort of Pocket-sized mirror, which reflects and explores the potentials of action provided by the 'liberal-controlled system' of Hong Kong; sometimes even transgressing the boundaries by going further than officially permitted and attempting to exhaust the limits of legality, and is therefore also entails a symbolic value of the informal condition of Hong Kong's past that is no longer existing today.

5 Conclusions and open questions

The disappearance of the informal

Today, one could almost talk about the disappearance of the ‘informal’ in HK. Many of the ‘informal qualities’ in a ‘classical’ understanding of the informal that once represented the urban image of Hong Kong, such as squatter settlements, taifun shelters, street hawkers and illegal balcony-constructions seems to be continuously erased from the city fabric.

The abortion of these Informal elements already started under the British colonial government – one could mention the demolition of the ‘Walled City Kowloon’ as an example – and was subsequently increased after the handover with an enhanced form of a formal organisation. Paradoxically this formal organisation offered also a high degree of acceptance and tolerance that is rather related to the ‘software’ of the city, the every-day life and its social interactions.

Could one make the assumption that the increasing level of control in the urban transformation process and motivated by economic considerations enabled and accepted a new type of tolerated space that has its physical equivalence?

The Street blocking ‘for the Filipina gathering on Sundays, that transforms the streets into a ‘collective living room’, or Chunking Mansions informal characters could be considered as such ‘alternatives or tolerated grey zones’ in the city.