

**ARCH7117: Hong Kong Architecture & Urbanism from 1840s to the Present**

**Final assignment**

**RESIST DISAPPEARANCE - PRESERVATION OF RESIDENTIAL  
CULTURES IN HONG KONG**

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# Resist Disappearance - Preservation of Residential Cultures in Hong Kong

**Summary:** Hong Kong is a city of constant evolving. Its citizens are witnessing the sweeping waves of architecture and streets being demolished and rebuilt with the residential culture at stake. The article discusses the preservation of the residential culture of Hong Kong in four aspects: rapid disappearance, coexisting of spaces, magnitude of everyday living, the symbols and memory. After the social, spatial, and theoretical analysis of the four aspects, the article elaborates some solutions for the preservation of residential culture in fast developing Hong Kong.

## 1. Introduction

“A central issue that Hong Kong culture implicitly or explicitly poses is the question of subjectivity in a space of disappearance.” (ACKBAR ABBAS 1997) , as the book was written, Hong Kong is a city renewed so quickly that almost nothing could last long. The great amounts of the buildings are replaced by new ones, the instant city, sometimes is described as a city without history, has plenty of space and memories disappeared. It is urgent to resist the disappearance. In all kind of disappearance, the residential cultures attached to the architecture and the street lost without notice and gone with no trace. However, they are the most important ones, for they shape the personality of the city.

Chu Cecilia discussed the collective memory of public housing in Hong Kong’s history in her article “Heritage of Disappearance Shekkipmei and Collective Memory in Post-Handover Hong Kong”. I agree with her recognition of the value of public housing preservation, but at the same time, I also questioned one of the phenomena - People living in public housing and tenement houses may think living in public housing is a bad living condition or a symbol of low-income groups, while for young visitors and the media, to expose the historicity of these buildings has become a nostalgic behavior. The definition of the heritage is ambiguous, is this like a museum to tell the stories or a symbol to memorize and that may lie the reason why people hold different opinions about the same site. She also argues that “only by anticipating the estate's eventual demolition and the preservation of a fragment of it as ‘heritage’, can it be reconceived as a ‘collective memory of people’, to be looked back upon

repeatedly with affection and admiration.” (Chu 2007) .The argument is a bit negative, there could be a different choice and perspective to look into the heritage and the history,

Compared with the collective of the memories of public housing, it is personal memories rather than collective memories that cause the most feelings about the living stories. Though the personal or individual memories vary from one to one, they depict a whole scene of the past that are specifically based on the experience of their previous life or their childhood. For example, the narrow width of the streets could invoke one's feelings about the experience in another city in another period, what works here is empathy. Usually, the personal memories are blur, mixed and unclear, however, we could always get the connection between the memorial imaginations to the reality in everyday life, and what is invoked is quite personal. Instead seeing the heritages of traditional urban life as a symbol of the period, it is a tendency for people to ask themselves how the past or the items remained in the city be related to certain personal memories. From this perspective, we do not need to experience the city to gain the feelings about the living stories, empathy happened once the connections are built.



p1: previous Mei Ho house



p2: the youth hostel of Mei Ho House

The last remained public house in the “MARK I” type named Mei Ho House was transformed into a youth hostel in 2013, during the renovation of Mei Ho Building, the traces of residence were erased, and the old neighborhood relations no longer existed, because the residents no longer exist, and the old buildings have become a symbolized site without previous everyday life. People get access to read its history, one piece of the history of Hong Kong, as well as the history of those once lived in it

by the photography and narration. However, the everyday life could not be represented, "the preservation of old buildings gives us history in site, but it also means keeping history in sight, A critique of preservation is therefore also a critique of visual ideology."(ACKBAR ABBAS 1997), the buildings could be visually accessed, but the transformation let the histories to be invisible.

Compared with the loss of everyday life, on the other side of the city, areas such as Sham Shui Po and Mong Kok, the history of the city is still alive, the buildings are still being resided and old lifestyles are also continued. There are also nostalgic people who go to these areas to record the scenes there. In a way, the residential cultures of the city are turning out to be a heritage that we could no longer lose.

Preservation of city life is often be ignored, in most cases, an urban heritage is in a certain architectural form, which has important historical significance. The government labels those buildings with historical significance as historical and cultural buildings, but it leads to just the symbolization. It is urgent to re-examine our lives and begin to think about what makes one city different. Under the trend of globalization, more and more cities have become assimilated. Tokyo, New York, and Shanghai have become visually the same. The situation of metropolises has become more and more uniform after the internationalism of the modern development of architecture and urban. For cities contain history, culture, and regional residential life. No matter how different cities tend to be assimilated in appearance, among the details that can be checked carefully, each city has a great personality. The unspoken characteristics make a city unique.

## **2. Social, Spatial and Theoretical Analysis**

### **2.1 Rapid Disappearance: Lost in The Modernity**

#### **2.1.1 Modernity**

Hong Kong is a constantly renewing city. It does not have a long history but undergoes rapid changes compared with other metropolitan cities around the world. It seems that there are no items that can last forever, and the buildings are constantly being updated. The texture of the street blocks began to change, and the speed of land reclamation was increasing. The skyline of the city is changing, and the buildings

are always being demolished and rebuilt. It is might be easy to articulate that the city has no history, while the truth is the opposite.

“By ‘modernity’, I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable.” (Charles Baudelaire, “The Painter of Modern Life”. The modernity of the city accelerates the renewing of the city. "Hong Kong is a city known through the cliche of frenetic rebuilding, where the old is swiftly demolished to make room for new ... what appears permanent is quite temporary." (Law 2002) The fashion comes and goes, nothing lasts long. The iteration of the city is much more quickly and obvious in Hong Kong. As what Max said, “all that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and men at last are forced to face with sober senses the real conditions of their lives and relations with their fellow men” (Karl Marx, “Communist Manifesto”1848) The disappearance is inevitable for the existence of the modernity.

### **2.1.2 Disappearance of the city**

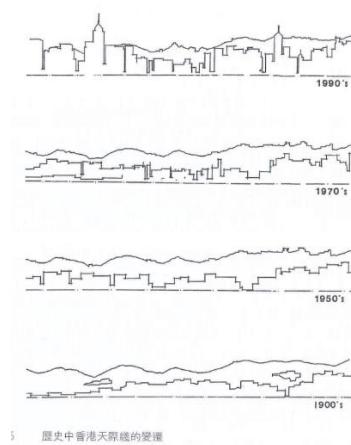
“A new wave of ‘disappearance’ that is now threatening the city both physically and spatially. In the accelerated pace of urban renewal, Hong Kong's monuments and streets are being demolished at an alarming rate, and more reclamations of land from Victoria Harbor are being planned. Under this relentless pressure to tear down and build, Hong Kong's self-image, its collective memory, its unique lifestyle are at risk.” (OU and LEE, n.d.) Facing the disappearance of the city, there needs to be another force to resist the process and gain the balance to mitigate the conflict between the old and new, the existing and the lost. As Appadurai said, "the project of production locality is an effort to work against the constant corrosion of the present, both by change and by uncertainty"(Appadurai et al. 2012)

“When the building are preserved , like the conversion of Flagstaff House into a museum of Chinese tea sets, such conversion is premised on a disappearance of history”, the house used to be for British military uses and is now currently used as a “harmonious accommodation of Chinese culture in colonial architecture”, while the historical association between the British and the Opium War disappear.(Law 2002) This happens all the times in Hong Kong, the public houses in Hong Kong have been developed for decades, the action like transforming the Mei Ho House into a youth hostel is

making some history disappeared. The spaces are never become multiple meanings, but the meanings are gone with no clear articulation about the history. The root of the spirit of the buildings are replaced something unrooted in the site, the buildings collapsed already in this view.

### 2.2.3 The Kowloon city

The Kowloon city is a museum of residential life in the certain site, it is dirty, full of realistic, and humanity revealing, but it was gone, replaced by a park with no stories and history. The bad living condition inside the building group could not cover the truth that it has become so impressive that it become the imaginative element of Hong Kong. Although the material basis of the buildings was gone, it still hard to be wiped out in the culture that existed in the books, media and most importantly, in people's mind. "Most people who lived there saw the place as home. They wanted to preserve It, and fought the changes being visited upon them as hard as they could... it was a very complex place, difficult to generalize about, a place that seemed frightening but where most people continued to lead normal lives." (Girard, n.d.) Though the substance of the buildings was gone, but the memories are strong.



歷史中香港天際線的變遷

p3: skyline development



p4: the Kowloon City



p5: Chungking Mansions

### 2.1.4 Chungking Mansions

Another case is Chungking Mansion, the buildings have been in the city without being demolished for several reasons. One is that there are up to 600 separated properties involved so it is hard for the

developer to gain the whole agreements, and for the Renewal Authority, it seems no advantages to gain by tearing it down to build a new building.(AL 2016) For the two reasons, the Chungking Mansions remained regardless of its shady reputation. However, the building is widely known for the movie Chungking Express directed by Kar Wai Wong. The movie shaped the imagination of the site in a way, exhibiting its chaos and high rate of crimes. The impression of the true reality in the movie may lead to a shady reputation of the building, meanwhile, it is adding the mystery of the mansion and anchor the buildings in the memories in the Hong Kong. We could not see another building that could be described as "globalize" one as it, and it is recalling the specific period, specific areas, specific spaces, and specific people. We could sense the space, even not at presence.

The imagination of Chungking Mansions is changing. For the African traders, the site could be an opportunity of great profit, and for the tourists, the Mansions become much more disappointed for it is becoming less crazy after it is cleaned up. And for the Hong Kong people, the building are no longer be widely seen as a negative place narrated by mass media. (MATHEWS 2011) The imaginations of the space were changing. it is hard to define the process as better or worse, people hold different opinions about the site, while it could be definitely said that space is a part of the city, and it is telling the storied in the history, no matter in the past, in the present or in the future. The mansions could be a residential culture to mark out the city in a quite special way.

## **2.2 Coexisting of Spaces: Mix of Time And Spaces**

### **2.2.1 Urban spaces coexisting**

We could see the historic buildings as a part of nowadays, they are not in the past, for the time and space are never separated. When we wander in the city, we go through one building to another which have different constructing periods, we experience both the time and space. In this way, we could see a map of multiple types of architecture and streets with time zones attached. In this perspective, the urban space could be a collection of history or living stories. There exists no exactly disappeared histories and no exactly disappeared architecture if one of the two could support another to resist disappearance. If both are gone, the stories are lost. In a mixed here and now, the architecture and

urbanism are deduced by the residents. Then it could be defined that the city is a collection of residential histories, so each building could locate itself in both the time and space with identity. Buildings with different ages share the same site of the city, coexisting to shape a whole scene of the history of the city.

There are still many historical districts in Hong Kong. When facing these historical districts, we will not regard them as heritage, but as life. Looking at the scene of Sham Shui Po, the old-fashioned tea restaurant, the cantilevered billboards. Taste, vision and hearing together shape the phenomenological experience of space. Urban development is not always homogeneous. the areas that changes slowly are often regarded as history remains and exists in the present. Sham Shui Po, Mong Kok, and Central and Tuen Mun are not having the same city atmosphere, for they develop in different periods in different ways, we could treat them as cities within a city. "the form of a city is under pressure from the dynamic life of its evolving history, particularly as reflected in the demand of each generation upon what is handed down. Shils has spoken of the appearance of the past in the present as the invariable mark of the play of tradition(Shils,1981)"(BLUM, n.d.), except for being the juxtaposition of the histories and stories, the city as the accumulation of the histories. In the linear timeslot, we could see the born, growth and the death of the buildings and the sites.

### **2.2.2 The phenomena**

"we live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another"(Foucault 1984), Foucault separated the phenomenon spaces into two types, one is the utopias which means a site with no place. This kind of space are sites with a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of society. And another type of places is called heterotopias which are real places different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about. The utopias are related to the imagination, the prospect of the city while the heterotopias are related to reality. Just as we learn from Bachelard's monumental work and the descriptions of phenomenologists that we do not live in a homogeneous and empty space but on the contrary in a space thoroughly imbued with quantities and perhaps thoroughly fantastic as well. The reality of the city is more about the mix of time and space. For the city of Hong Kong, the mix is obvious. There is Tong Lau speaking

about the histories, and old generations of public houses talking about the regional context and density of the city, but also the new towers telling the new ways of daily life. in this perspective, we could find our city a mix and iteration of time and space. As the article writes "it is necessary to notice that the space which today appears to form the horizon of our concerns , our theory, our systems, is not an innovation; space itself has a history in Western experience, and it is not possible to disregard the history of space very roughly."(Foucault 1984)

## **2.3 Magnitude of Everyday Living: Reveal the Beauty of Humanity**

### **2.3.1 Redefinition of heritage**

Goethe wrote Faust to show that there exists an affinity between the cultural ideal of self-development and the real social movement toward economic development. And the two must come together and fuse into one. (BERMAN 1988) In Hong Kong, the development of the economy is mostly isolated from the self-development of culture. The culture is mainly carried by people's everyday life. The culture exists, mixes, and develops without intervention. It is not hard to say Hong Kong is special, but it could be hard to tell what makes it special, the everyday life as one important part of the culture, in most of the time, is ignored. It is necessary to think about how Hong Kong residents live and how the density of the city to shape the specific living conditions. Without those, the identity of the city could easily be lost. If everyday life lost, the spatial stories could never be told.

### **2.3.2 Collective memories and the sources**

The collective basis of the city is precisely an empathy experience of outsiders. Architecture is the carrier of man, man is the carrier of life, and memory comes from daily life. The distinction between architecture and daily life will eventually lead to a separation, the separation of people and memory. People cherish the traces left by history, a kind of extremely fetish nostalgia, it could be explained in four aspects.

The first one is the cultural habits. People's habits do not change when the locations of residing changes. When people living in public houses move to apartments in towers, people might carry their living

habits, such as the habit of drying laundry to the new residence. And the continuous of the living habit form the psychological path to the past.

The second is empathy, people get to know the place not for he or she has been and gotten emotional connections with the site, while they get the same feelings with those who reside or used to reside in the site by empathy.

The third is cultural reproduction, such as Chungking Express are forming the imagination of the city, even if we have not actually visited that city or a certain building, we have already experienced that scene in our imagination. Our bodies are eager to experience that new sense of reality, and that form the nostalgia.

And the last one is the experience of spatial phenomena. The spatial experience of the certain place would leave a great impression of our body and mind. The ability for us to reappear the scene we have experienced force us to gain nostalgia.

### **2.3.3 Everyday life is more important than the building itself**

"in short, space is a practiced place, thus the street geometrically defined by urban planners is transformed into a space by walker." (de Certeau, n.d.) For the architecture, it is the same, people tell the story of the buildings as histories. The whole buildings in the city are telling a whole story of the context.

"in our examination of the daily practices that articulate that experience, the opposition between 'place' and 'space' will rather refer to two sort of determinations: the first, a determination through objects that are ultimately reducible to the being-there of something dead, the law of a 'place', the second, a determination through operations which when they are attributed to a store , tree, or human being, specify 'spaces' by the actions of historical subjects." (de Certeau, n.d.) For the heritage of the city, the building is dead part as the place while the human which are the historical subjects are making the urban places into spaces. It is necessary to emphasize the importance of human activities in the heritage

that need to be maintained and protected, rather than demolish the whole traces of living, the decision-maker should develop some methods to main the life in the area as well. The lifestyle could be fragile if the insertion or transformation happen. It could be found that most culture heritages defined by the authorities are mainly kept as someplace to visit instead of to memorize. Only the commercial activities run and turn the atmosphere into another type away from what it was like in history. The visitors seldomly recalled the true history or the reality but just learn what is narrated by the authorities or the businessmen. And in this way, the “place” is remained, but the “spaces” are gone.

“As many urban and social researchers have indicated, users should be the key factor in any consideration of a space”, (Bell 2016) for the protection of historic area of the cities, it make no sense to move out the local people and change the functions of the architecture. Take the Mei Ho House as the example, when transformed into a youth hostel, even though the whole buildings are remained, the users were changed, the building showed the essence of materials rather than the humanity with locality.

#### **2.3.4 Everyday life in the street**

Streets are another main area of the city where everyday life is going on. Hong Kong people have great use of the street. Take the Beihe Street in Sham Shui Po for example, from public space (a pedestrian and vehicle mixed road) to semi-public space (placement of structures), and then to private spaces (storefronts and residences), the levels of space in Beihe Street is transitional. With changes, the relationship between the flow of people and traffic becomes ambiguous, at the same time, social boundaries are blurred. People began to actively use the streets, letting the streets become social spaces. Tectonic space began to affect non-structural space, in this way, the shape of the street changes. For the boundaries began to become organic and complex, the flow of people expands while the speed slows down, the business activities increase. The spontaneous spatial behavior expands the possibilities of the street and at the same time creates a humanistic space in the city. Besides the commercial activities, there are more activities like Mahjong and chatting could happen in the traditional streets. The whole atmosphere of the street shapes the contour of the Hong Kong peoples social life.

## 2.4 The Symbols and Memory: Anchor in The City

### 2.4.1 Symbols as the anchor of memories

Symbols of the city are of great importance to shape people's memories. They are more like anchors to combine the strangers to form collective memories. "Memories tie us to that place...it's personal, not interesting to anyone else, but after all that's what gives a neighbor its character." (Michel de Certeau 1988) Memories act as the key to build the connection between the nowadays and the histories. and that based on the reminder of the existence of the buildings or the streets that once be lived. the fragments left as demonstratives are important, just as written, "it is striking here that the places people live in are like the presences of diverse absences. What can be seen designates what is no longer there..." Symbols are the link to the past. It is not hard to find the inherit of the traditional life in the historical space, even though they are not gone but as the symbols to invoke the ineffable feeling of feelings, which could be a sense of loss.

### 2.4.2 Examples

One example is the cantilevered advertising boards in Sham Shui Po, people regarded the character as a symbol of traditional life in Hong Kong, even more, a symbol of Hong Kong, that could be a key to the past life so many young people let the great advertising board as the background as the marriage photography to make it special. When the government of Hong Kong SAR demolished the advertising boards, it caused a sense of disappearing and the nostalgia feelings could never find the projections in the reality.

Another example is the Edinburgh Place Star Ferry Pier((1957-2006), when the building is about to be demolished, To save the piers, the movement referred to in the local community as "the Star and the Queen movement"(Tinaxing huanghou yundong) was led by local people to save the heritage.(Ting 2013) , this is related to collective memories as well as to the symbol of the city. City is for reside and residents all settle down in certain areas emotionally. Like a link to combine each other and a door opens to the memories, the symbols of the city are necessary to be protected. They become symbols by accumulating the everyday life of great amounts of individuals, they could not be created, if gone, no new ones could be the replacements.

### **3. Solution to The Disappearance: To Find The Equilibrium**

#### **3.1 Equilibrium of spaces**

How to reserve the historic buildings in the city, Weijen Wang showed us access, “Space is both social and political, it is full of constant interactions, confrontations, and conflicts, once there is conflict, the equilibrium of a space will immediately change, so there is not an absolutely stable space. When a situation become unstable , different stakeholders may compromise with each other to achieve a balanced result, that is what called a neutral equilibrium.” (Bell 2016) it might be hard for us to find the neutral equilibrium between the new and the past, the young and the old, but there could be one. Instead of demolishing the building or set museum for those, how about evaluating it, and think more about how we could make full use of it and think highly of residential life rather than the building itself. For example, Hong Kong government is carrying out a scheme about the transitional housing scheme in Hong Kong to fully use the vacant public houses, which could be a guideline for the future transformation of the city. Under these efforts, we could not lose our history as well as memories for it is vivid, true and experienceable.

#### **3.2 Intervention methods**

Blum articulated that, "the city presents the spectacle of the dialectic between inexorable attrition and the need and desire for creative intervention"(BLUM, n.d.), while the intervention should be careful, for the everyday life about the site could easily be gone when insertions happen, “when public spaces are developed, maintained and surveyed by developers, they lose their status of ‘public’ spaces”.(Law 2002) This raises a problem about how the surveyors and designers could involve in the development of the city. To reveal the story behind the site, it is important to save the living habit, living culture, and everyday life in addition to the reservation of the buildings.

One solution is to add new characteristics to the site as well as keeping the original ones. "The production of locality is a reminder that even the most apparently mechanical forms of social order that seem to function without design, contingency, or intentionality but simply by force of routine -

what we used to call habit - involve large amounts of deliberate attention, effort, and labor ... so the idea is not to, as it were, de-spatialize the local, or evacuate the spatial from the local, but to add something to it." (Appadurai et al. 2012) By enriching the locality, the site could self0-develop into a more complex condition, with the remain of history, the use of the present, and possibilities for the future.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Rethinking about the elements of the city, we could think not only the buildings, infrastructures, and the streets or the traffic, but much more to imagine about, related to memories, histories, the unique experience of individuals. The city is fragile when the city is being forgotten, losing its images, turning into another appearance, being wiped out the traces of living and the everyday life that seems to be normal but precious. To resist the disappearance, no risk should be taken to let go of the residential cultures of the city, all that of which makes Hong Kong be Hong Kong.

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