

Empathy Beyond Comfort: Friction, Variety and Memory as Social Infrastructure in Hong Kong's Dense Urbanism

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Abstract

Hong Kong's dense urbanism often equates empathy with comfort, safety, and efficiency—separating uses, internalising circulation, and managing public space. But when care becomes comfort management, the city loses the productive frictions through which people negotiate difference, build memory, and invent shared life. This paper argues that inclusive design should not merely remove discomfort; it should sustain variety, friction, and incompleteness as social resources. Two graduate design studies test this idea. Wan Chai layers new density above street-level memory, mixing programmes and everyday routines. Sheung Shui embraces conflict and overlap through shared ground, corridor commons, mandatory balconies, and under-defined pockets. Together, they frame empathy as spatial generosity for coexistence, negotiation, and belonging in dense Hong Kong.

Keywords

Empathetic urbanism, Inclusive Design, Social Infrastructure, Dense Urbanism, Productive Friction, Everyday Life

1. Introduction: Empathy Beyond Comfort

Empathetic and inclusive design increasingly extends beyond accessibility and universal provision to consider emotional connection, diversity, participation and spatial equity. Yet in practice, these intentions are often translated into familiar spatial strategies: safer access, clearer circulation, smoother management and the reduction of inconvenience.

These concerns are necessary, especially in dense cities where users of different ages, abilities and routines share limited space. Yet in Hong Kong, where density is already tied to speed, efficiency, control and high development pressure, empathy can become paradoxical. When care is translated mainly into comfort management, it may suppress the unstable conditions through which urban communities learn, adapt and sustain themselves.

Hong Kong's recent development is shaped not only by the separation of uses, but by what is easiest to measure and monetise. Gross floor area, residential yield, office efficiency and retail revenue often become the most visible indicators of performance, while public life, tenant diversity, informal encounter and neighbourhood care are harder to quantify and are pushed to the margins. Retail planning is therefore often driven less by everyday community needs than by rental capacity, brand security and tenants' ability to sustain higher rents.

The irony is that these less measurable qualities are precisely what sustain empathetic and incl-



Figure 1. Hong Kong: The Disappearing Street
A pedestrian rushes across a busy road beneath dense high-rise buildings, revealing a street condition where sidewalks barely support basic movement, let alone pause, encounter, or social life.

Source: Author, 2015.

usive urban life over time. Variety, comfort and mixed character give people reasons to stay, return, adapt and build familiarity. They also support a healthier urban economy, because places people enjoy repeatedly generate footfall, visibility and opportunities for local businesses.

Yet when commercial value becomes the primary measure, circulation itself becomes a commercial instrument. Podium malls and internal retail networks are arranged to maximise pedestrian flow, shopfront exposure and dwell time, using toilets, transport links, escalators and es-

sential routes to extend movement through the interior. These spaces may be weather-protected and commercially productive, but they replace the uncertainty of streets with controlled sequences of consumption. What remains is an overlap of movement, not an overlap of opportunities: people keep moving, but have fewer chances to pause, linger, appropriate space or recognise one another.

2. From Street Life to Managed Ground

Podiums, Fences, and the Disappearance of Everyday Interface

2.1. Physical Infrastructure Dominates

Hong Kong is often celebrated for urban efficiency. Its MTR stations, footbridges, podiums and climate-controlled interiors allow people to move through the city with remarkable speed. Yet this efficiency also weakens the social layer of the ground. Public movement is often absorbed into transport-linked interiors, while streets become spaces to pass through rather than places to pause, meet or stay.

This reflects a planning bias towards what can be measured from above: massing, density, connectivity, traffic flow and development efficiency. Yet the lived city happens below this measurable layer, in small pauses, edges, casual encounters, shopfront conversations and moments of being squeezed to the side of a pedestrian road. Online shopping, automated services and rapid delivery may further weaken the functional reasons to visit street-level shops. If the functional reasons for using the street co-



Figure 2. Maritime Square as an MTR-Integrated Shopping Mall A typical Hong Kong podium mall where transport access, escalators and retail circulation are closely integrated. Pedestrian movement is channelled through interior commercial routes, increasing shopfront exposure and dwell time while reducing the role of the street as the primary public interface.

Source: Malls.com — Maritime Square.



Figure 3. Typical podium-and-footbridge urban condition in Hong Kong, where elevated circulation, transport infrastructure, and shopping mall access compress the street into a traffic-dominated and uncomfortable ground level. Pedestrians are crowded along narrow edges, while bus terminals, noise, and vehicular movement reduce the street's capacity for staying, waiting, and everyday social life. Source: Author, 2025.

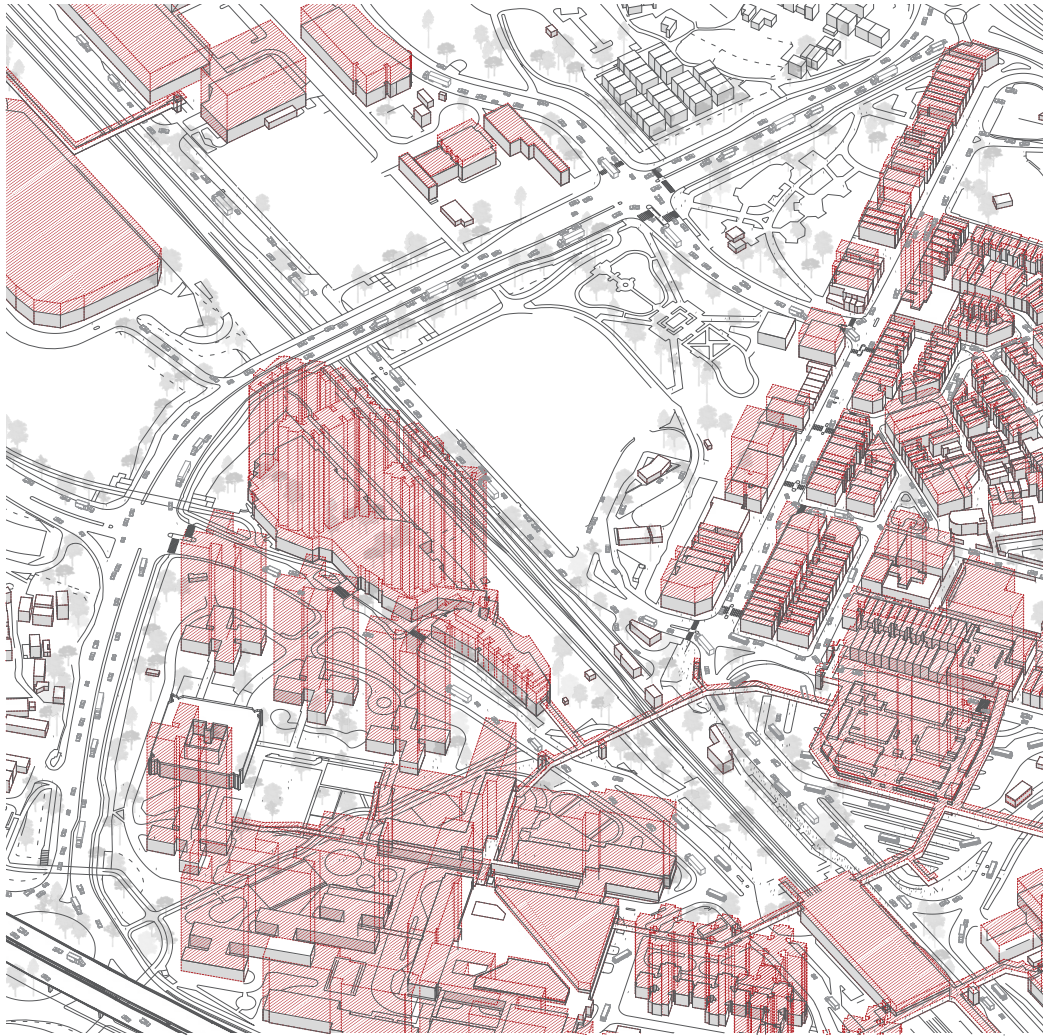


Figure 4. A City Seen From Above, A Life Lived Below

Finished size: 800 × 800 mm, resized to 300 × 300 mm | Digital illustration with simulated paper texture

A planner's-eye view of Sheung Shui, where red-hatched building volumes above 10 metres dominate the drawing and obscure the everyday spaces beneath. The red layer represents what top-down planning often privileges: vertical massing, density, and development efficiency. Yet much of daily life takes place below this layer, at street level and along the footbridge network. In the original physical drawing, a red lens could be used to filter out the dominant massing and reveal the lived city below; in this reproduced figure, the image records that contrast between planned density and everyday urban life.

Source: Author, 2025.

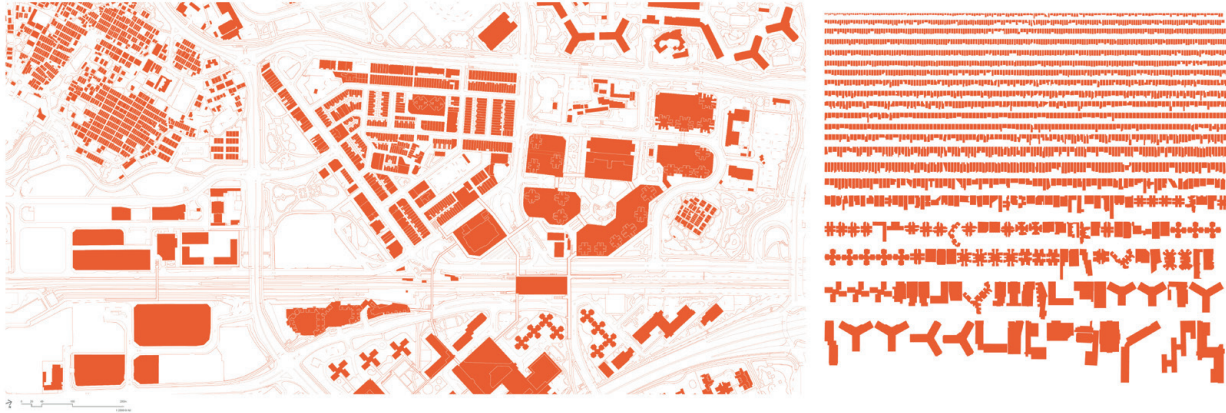


Figure 5. The Ground We Lost: Re-sorting Sheung Shui Masses Finished size: 140 × 720 mm | Diagram Drawing
Extending the conceived map through a Nolli-inspired method, this drawing highlights building mass across the Sheung Shui study area at 1:2000, then realigns and sorts the figures by size. A pattern observed through this exercise is that newer developments tend to claim larger and more continuous ground coverage. As shared and reachable ground is progressively given up, urban life is increasingly reduced to point-to-point circulation, with fewer chances to pause, encounter, or linger. The drawing therefore asks whether the ground can be designed and reclaimed differently, so forms of street life that once appeared more naturally may re-emerge.
Source: Author, 2026.

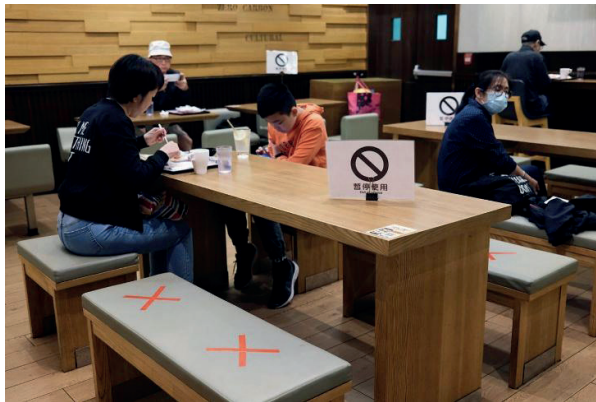


Figure 6. Social Distancing in Hong Kong during COVID-19 Social distancing marks on restaurant seating during the COVID-19 outbreak illustrate how even minimal forms of public encounter were temporarily restricted. The pandemic highlighted that dining out and occupying shared spaces are not only functional activities, but also basic forms of social contact, environmental change and participation in urban life.

Source: Reuters / Tyrone Siu, 29 March 2020, via The Jakarta

ntinue to diminish, the more fundamental question is what the street should remain for. Its value lies not only in what it enables people to reach, but in preserving the right to inhabit the city without having to consume, transact, or arrive somewhere else.

The pandemic also revealed that people do not occupy streets only to consume or arrive somewhere; they also seek air, contact, movement and the right to inhabit the city without having to transact.

2.2. Podium urbanism removes friction

Podium urbanism makes this condition more visible. In developments such as Tseung Kwan O, residential towers are raised above malls, bus termini, loading areas, E&M rooms and ser-

vicing infrastructure. Pedestrians are directed towards air-conditioned interiors and elevated footbridges, while the ground becomes residual, uncomfortable or back-of-house. Once this system is established, adjacent plots often connect into the same podium-and-bridge network,

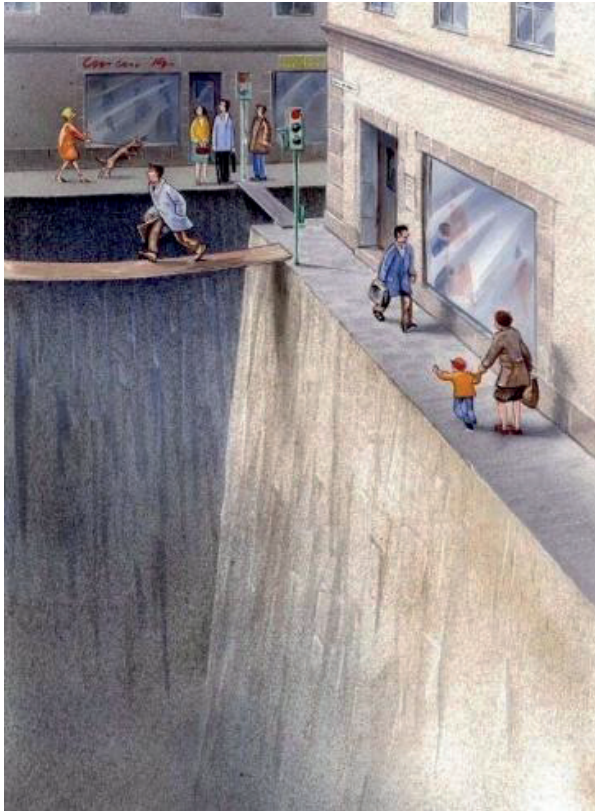


Figure 7. Reframing the Traffic-Oriented Street
Originally produced by Karl Jilg for the Swedish Road Administration to illustrate traffic safety and pedestrian vulnerability, this drawing is read here as an ironic critique of car-oriented urban perception: how streets become psychologically accepted as vehicular territory, while pedestrians are left to move humbly along the margins.

Credit: Karl Jilg / Swedish Road Administration.

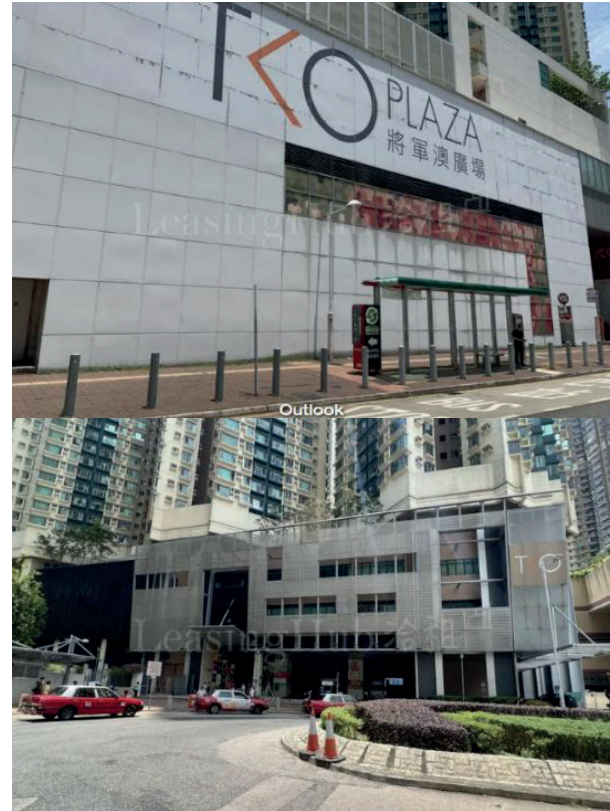


Figure 8. Podium Urbanism at Tseung Kwan O Plaza
Two views illustrate a typical podium-style development in Tseung Kwan O, where the ground plane is dominated by taxi drop-offs, bus bays, loading areas, E&M facilities and back-of-house servicing. Retail is lifted into the podium above, leaving few active street-facing shopfronts and directing pedestrians toward interior, air-conditioned circulation routes rather than the street.

Source: LeasingHub — Tseung Kwan O Plaza.

reproducing an inward-facing pattern where the ground functions more as servicing infrastructure than public realm.

Commercial circulation also becomes a design instrument. Podium malls often use toilets, transport links, escalators and essential routes to extend pedestrian movement through retail interiors. These spaces may be weather-protected and efficient, but they replace the uncertainty of streets with controlled sequences of consumption. People still overlap, but mainly as moving consumers rather than as users with opportunities to pause, appropriate space or recognise one another.



Figure 9. Podium-Tower Public Housing Typology in Tseung Kwan O Kin Ming Estate shows a typical Hong Kong public housing estate where residential towers are raised above a podium base, with ground-level space shaped by transport access, servicing, and circulation. The image illustrates how podium urbanism can detach everyday housing life from the street, turning the ground into movement infrastructure rather than an active public realm.

2.3. Public spaces become intention-oriented

Many typical public parks in Hong Kong were designed as enclosed destinations, separated from the street by fences, walls, planting belts or level changes. These edges can provide privacy and help buffer traffic noise, vehicle emissions and visual disturbance, but they also weaken the park's relationship with everyday pedestrian movement. Rather than allowing street life to spill naturally into public space, users are asked to cross a clear boundary and intentionally enter a designated recreational "room."



Figure 10. Searching for a Free Open-Air Seat in Wan Chai

A scene from a Mill MILK video showing the difficulty of finding a free, non-commercial, open-air place for take-away lunch in Wan Chai. Within the dense commercial district, podiums, malls and point-to-point circulation leave few places to sit without paying. A table is eventually found only farther away at the promenade park, revealing how basic needs such as shade, air, seating and eating space are displaced from the inner city.

Source: Mill MILK, YouTube video, accessed 2026.

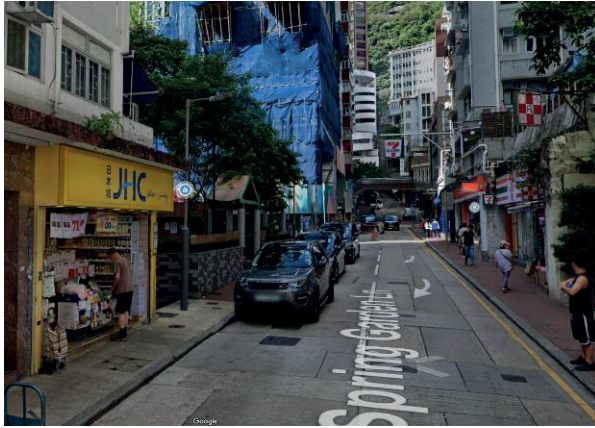


Figure 11. Spring Garden Lane Sitting-out Area, Wan Chai

A typical small urban park in Hong Kong, enclosed by high planter edges, fences and gated entrances. Curbside parking further weakens visibility and access from the street, making the space feel isolated and inward-looking rather than a natural extension of everyday pedestrian life. Source: Google Street View.

As a Hong Konger, it is genuinely delightful to see the recent development of the harbour promenades and the gradual reconnection of the waterfront. These spaces finally feel more convincing as public ground: generous in scale, open to different activities, and less dependent on a fixed reason for being there. People can simply walk, bring a dog, cycle, jog, sit, or continue along the waterfront without a clear destination.

However, the concern is that this success does not necessarily relieve the condition of the in-between street spaces, and may even make the contrast more apparent. While major promenades become increasingly attractive, continuous and carefully designed, the ordinary streets



Figure 12. East Coast Park Precinct, Fortress Hill

A recent harbourfront development illustrating a more open and continuous form of public space, accommodating walking, sitting, play, pets and informal leisure along the waterfront. Its generous scale and flexible use contrast with the more enclosed and purpose-specific public spaces commonly found within the city.

Source: CoastalTrail.hk, "The Opening of the East Coast Park Precinct (Phase 1) in Fortress Hill," 2021.

connecting homes, shops, transport and neighbourhood facilities can remain fragmented, narrow, over-managed or dominated by movement.

For residents and locals, everyday public life cannot depend only on travelling to a sanitised waterfront destination when there is spare time on a weekend or an extra 1-hour-up available. It also needs smaller, ordinary spaces where daily life can spill out, overlap and be negotiated, e.g. a doorstep, widened pavement, informal corner, pocket space or shopfront edge encountered naturally along the way. These modest interfaces lack the scale of a promenade, but bring public life directly into everyday routines, rather than a planned leisure.



Figure 13. Negotiated Use of a Playground Court, Sheung Shui

A playground court in Sheung Shui shows how open space is often used through informal agreement rather than fixed programming. Children play basketball lightly while pedestrians cut diagonally across the court, with both sides adjusting to avoid conflict. This tacit agreement reveals a hidden layer of negotiation within everyday public space.

At the same time, the scene suggests a limitation of programme-oriented open space. Although designed for play, the court also becomes a shortcut and waiting space, indicating that the neighbourhood may lack more flexible places for lingering, passing, and informal occupation.

Source: Author, 2025.

2.4. Publicness as a Rebound: Shared Life after Sanitised Comfort

From Shared Necessity to Private Comfort, and Back to Renewed Collective Living

This may explain the renewed desire for shared environments. Earlier forms of close community in Hong Kong were often shaped by material shortage: corridor kitchens, shared toilets, open



Figure 14. Corridor Kitchens and Shared Life in Early Hong Kong Public Housing

Corridor kitchens in early Hong Kong public housing reveal how limited space and shared amenities once turned circulation into an everyday communal interface. Although produced by material shortage, these conditions allowed cooking, passing, conversation, and neighbourly recognition to overlap, suggesting how shared life can emerge from spatial necessity.

Source: Hong Kong Youth Hostels Association, Jockey Club Mei Ho House Hong Kong Spirit

doors and neighbours gathering around shared amenities. These conditions were not ideal, but they produced casual proximity. As living becomes more private, interiorised and sanitised, the desire for shared life returns in new forms such as co-living, co-working, communal kitchens and shared lounges.

This cyclical shift can be compared to fashion trends, where loose and tight trousers alternate when one tendency becomes too dominant. Urban life also moves between separation and togetherness, controlled comfort and everyday friction.

3. Variety as Infrastructure, Productive Friction, Memory as Urban Continuity

Beyond Point-to-Point Movement: Conditions for Everyday Urban Life

For this paper, variety, friction and memory are treated as social infrastructure. Variety gives people reasons to enter, stay and return; friction allows difference to be negotiated rather than avoided; memory accumulates through repeated use, small traces and everyday recognition. These qualities are often treated as soft or supplementary, but they are what make a city feel alive. As Jan Gehl suggests, a good city is like a good party - people stay longer because they are enjoying themselves.

This framework also explains why standardisation is not only spatial but economic. In Hong Kong, tenant-mix control, turnover rent, renovation clauses, relocation clauses and bundled leasing practices can make independent shops



Figure 15. Aftermath of the Shek Kip Mei Fire, 1953
The 1953 Shek Kip Mei fire left tens of thousands homeless and became a turning point in Hong Kong's public housing history. While the disaster exposed the vulnerability of dense squatter settlements, the relatively limited reported casualties compared with the scale of displacement may also suggest strong neighbourly awareness, rapid communication, and informal mutual support within the community.

Source: Unknown author, Aftermath of the 1953 Shek Kip Mei Fire in Hong Kong, 1953, Wikimedia Commons / Hong Kong

difficult to sustain. The result is a city that may appear orderly and commercially stable, but gradually loses the variety and informal friction that support long-lasting public life.

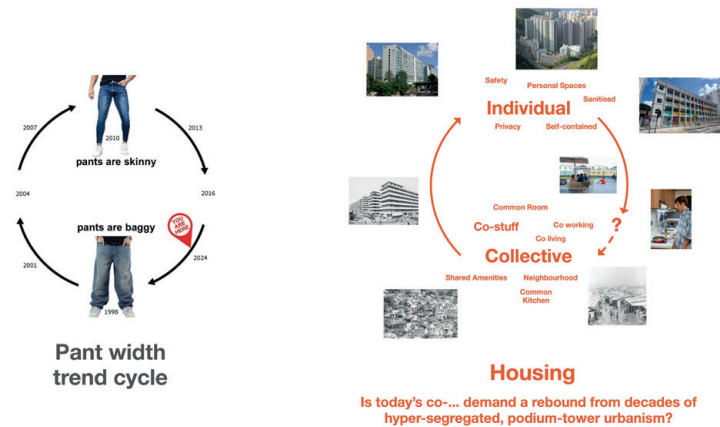


Figure 16. Cyclical shifts between loose and tight fashion trends as an analogy for changing urban desires. The diagram is used metaphorically to suggest how social preferences often rebound when one condition becomes too dominant. In the context of Hong Kong's increasingly managed and interiorised urban ground, the renewed interest in co-living, co-working and shared communal spaces may reflect a wider desire to recover everyday forms of proximity, informality and encounter.

Source: Diagram by the author, incorporating reference images collected from various online sources. Individual image sources are credited where applicable.



Figure 17. Old North Point Estate and Everyday Street Variety

The old North Point estate shows a more informal public housing environment, where everyday life extended through local shops, open edges, small businesses, and neighbourhood routines. Although the buildings were ageing and later associated with hygiene, safety, and redevelopment concerns, the estate also carried a strong mixture of users, programmes, and street-level vitality.

Source: Our China Story, “香港北角邨”, image reference.



Figure 18. Sanitised Redevelopment and the Loss of Local Vibrancy

The renewed development provides a cleaner, more organised, and set-back street environment. However, much of the former variety has been replaced by chain stores, mall-oriented retail, and a more standardised commercial setting. The street space remains physically present, but its informal mixture, local vibrancy, and neighbourhood character are weakened.

Source: Google Maps Street View

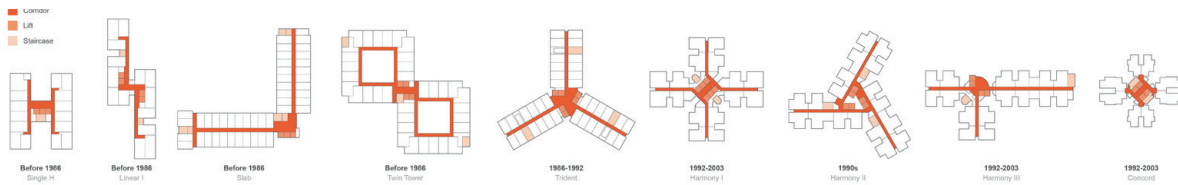


Figure 19. The Missing Commons: Memory Erased by Efficiency Finished size: 600 × 160 mm | Diagram drawings
This drawing reflects on the recurring efficient public-estate template in Hong Kong, where repeated corridor-and-unit arrangements are optimised for unit provision and circulation, but leave few spaces for shared commons. Everyday routes become fast and functional, yet socially thin, prioritising point-to-point movement over pause, lingering, and neighbourly encounter.

For many residents living decades within these standardised plans, housing becomes functional yet leaves too few places to pause, linger, and accumulate shared memory.

Source: Author, 2026.



Figure 20. Typical Public Housing Lift Lobby

A typical lift lobby design in contemporary Hong Kong public housing.

Source: animod_modeling, Hk Public Housing Corridor 003 3D Model, TurboSquid, 2024.



Figure 21. Typical Public Housing Corridor

A typical corridor in contemporary Hong Kong public housing, prioritising point-to-point circulation, efficiency, and compliance with fire escape requirements.

Source: Hong Kong Housing Authority, Environmental Report 2020/21: Environmental Performance — Initiatives in Planning and Construction of New Public Housing.

3.1. Link to design Studies

The following two design studies test how these qualities might be protected or recreated. Wan Chai explores community continuity through contextual differentiation, asking how new density can be layered around an existing street culture. Sheung Shui takes the opposite approach, testing whether a new public housing prototype can generate community through friction, shared ground, under-defined pockets and memory-building interfaces.

4. Design Study I – Wan Chai

The Wan Chai project explores how densification can take place without weakening the street life, cultural identity, and community cohesion that define the district. Rather than rejecting development pressure, it imagines a more people-centric form of growth: one that preserves Wan Chai's streetscape, reinterprets Tong Lau and composite building typologies, and introduces shared terraces, balconies, pocket landscapes, and an upper layer of density that coexists with the neighbourhood's existing rhythm and human scale.

4.1. Existing value

Wan Chai's value is not only found in historic buildings, but in the intangible human touch embedded in its everyday street life. Its identity is produced through shopfront conversations, owners remembering regular customers' preferences, informal trust such as allowing payment later, and honest recommendations based on care rather than pure transaction. These small

exchanges form a social layer behind the physical city, giving Wan Chai a sense of familiarity, tolerance, and neighbourhood continuity.

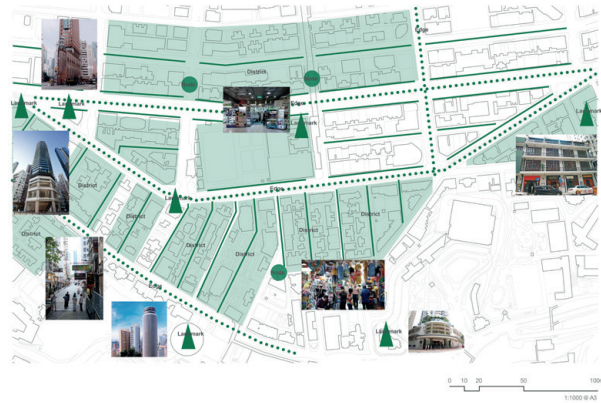


Figure 22. Mapping Wan Chai through Kevin Lynch's Five Elements

A map diagram of the Wan Chai study area, reading the district through Kevin Lynch's five urban elements: paths, edges, districts, nodes, and landmarks. The drawing identifies how tramlines, main streets, building fronts, market clusters, pocket spaces, and familiar local anchors structure the way Wan Chai is experienced, remembered, and navigated. Source: Author, 2026.

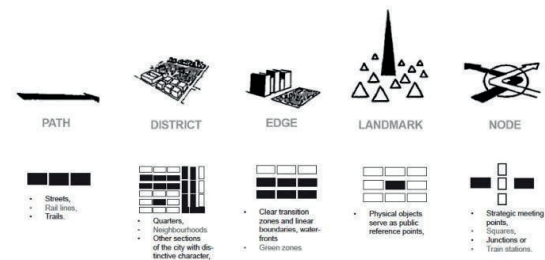


Figure 23. Kevin Lynch's Five Elements of the City Diagram from Kevin Lynch's *The Image of the City*, illustrating the five elements through which people read, organise, and remember urban environments: paths, edges, districts, nodes, and landmarks.

Source: Lynch, K. (1960) *The Image of the City*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.



Figure 24. Mixed Users in Cross Street, Wan Chai
A Wan Chai inner street showing the everyday overlap of tourists, local residents, office workers, shop owners, service workers, and foreign visitors within the same dense street environment. The image captures the district's social mixture and informal urban vibrancy.
Source: Film Promotion and Facilitation Section, Location Library: Cross Street, Wan Chai, accessed 2026.



Figure 25. Tai Yuen Street Toy Market, Wan Chai
A well-known street market and tourist spot in Wan Chai, showing the district's lively shopfronts, specialised retail, and everyday street character.
Source: Expedia, Tai Yuen Street Toy Market Tours, accessed 2026.

The project therefore begins by reading Wan Chai at the scale of its dense small-street network. Narrow streets, short walking distances,

frequent turns, and repeated decision points create many chances for encounter and recognition. Tong Lau and composite buildings are not valued only for their fixed appearance, but for the mixed-use logic they support: shops at grade, services and workshops above, and homes layered within the same urban section. This mixture brings together office workers, local residents, shop owners, elderly recyclers pushing trolleys, visitors, and tourists moving between familiar places such as Tai Yuen Street, the Blue House, and other neighbourhood anchors. These conditions are understood as existing social infrastructure, not background fabric to be cleared.

4.2. Design Strategy

Rather than rejecting development pressure, the project treats additional GFA as a development incentive that must be carefully integrated with Wan Chai's existing street life. The aim is not to stop growth, but to redirect it: allowing the district to accommodate greater floor area while preserving the spatial qualities, mixed uses, and everyday encounters that make its streets recognisable.

The massing strategy begins from the ground. It maintains the 26-metre width of the MTR station zone to sustain pedestrian connectivity, then mirrors Wan Chai's existing street hierarchy through 10-metre main streets and 6-metre secondary streets. By defining these streets first, building plots are demarcated from the urban fabric rather than imposed as isolated blocks. The plots are then extruded into simple volumes, before being adjusted to echo the scale

and logic of Tong Lau and composite building typologies.

A 10-storey, 35-metre base is introduced to recall the historical composite building scale, with setbacks and deep verandas referencing the weather-protected quality and scale of old streets. The rectangular massing is then squeezed, offset, and varied to introduce a de-

gree of randomness and urban character, avoiding a purely generic redevelopment form. At the lower levels, shops, services, clinics, workshops, and housing remain vertically mixed, while balconies, rooftop terraces, stepped gardens, small bridges, and mid-level pockets transform traditional building elements into communal landscape spaces.

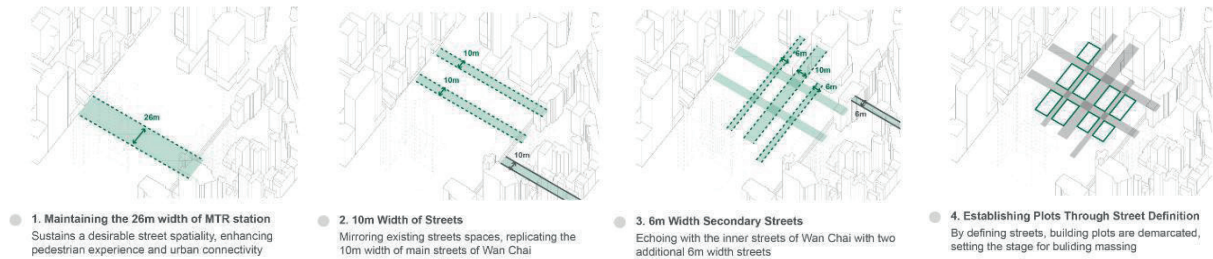


Figure 26. Street and Plot Definition Author's diagram showing how existing Wan Chai street widths and plot logic inform the initial massing framework. Source: Author, 2026.

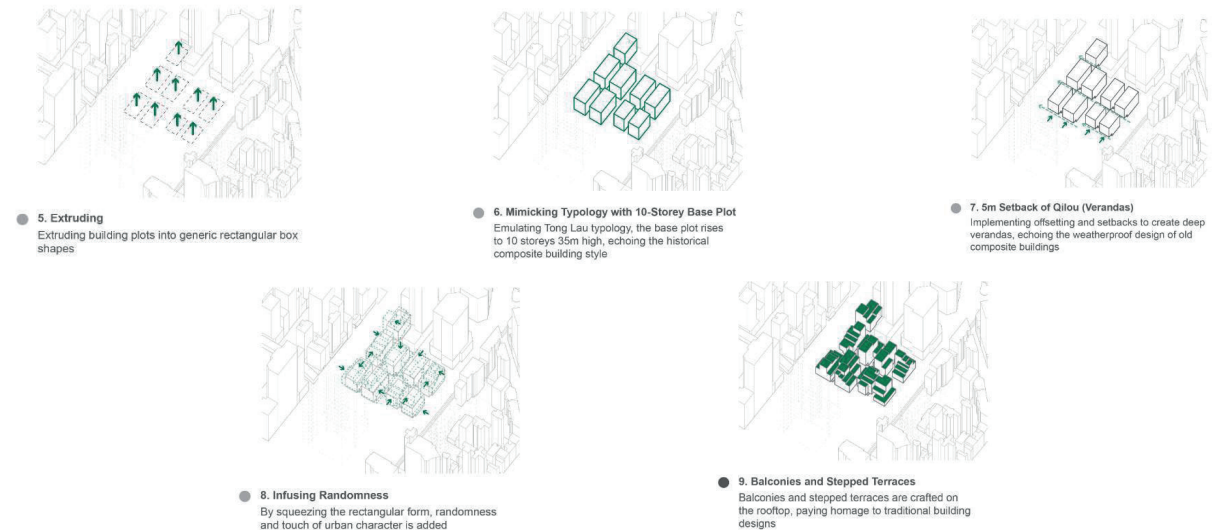


Figure 27. Reinterpreting Composite Building Scale

Author's diagram showing the development of a lower urban base through setbacks, verandas, balconies, and terraces. Source: Author, 2025.

To meet development demands, the project studies the existing site GFA and tests a strategy that can approximately double the floor area. Instead of allowing this added density to overwhelm the street, the higher levels are separated from the 10-storey base and lifted as accessible towers with clear vertical cores. Offset tower blocks create dynamic mid-level moments, terraces, and gardens, allowing new urban intensity to sit above the existing street logic. In this way, densification becomes a layered negotiation: growth is accepted, but the fine-grained relationship between people, streets, programmes, and buildings is protected.

4.3. Empathy model

The empathy model in this project is one of careful differentiation. Empathy does not mean freezing Wan Chai as a nostalgic image, nor does it mean allowing development to erase its

existing character. Instead, it means recognising which street-level conditions carry social value, and designing new density around them with care.

The project is less concerned with visually reproducing Wan Chai's old fabric than with preserving the mixture that gives the district its social life: mixed programmes, mixed users, mixed building depths, and mixed thresholds between public and private.

By treating people first, then space, then buildings, the project frames densification as a process of negotiation with existing community memory. Its inclusive ambition lies in protecting the everyday anchors that allow residents, shopkeepers, workers, and visitors to continue recognising Wan Chai as a lived neighbourhood rather than a generic redevelopment site.

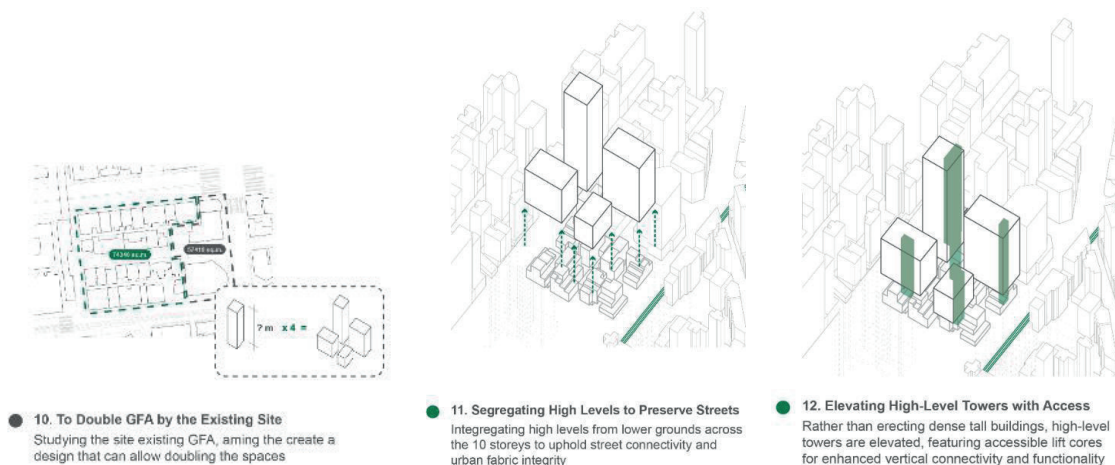


Figure 28. Layering Additional Density

Author's diagram showing how higher-level density is lifted and offset above the street-based urban fabric.

Source: Author, 2025.

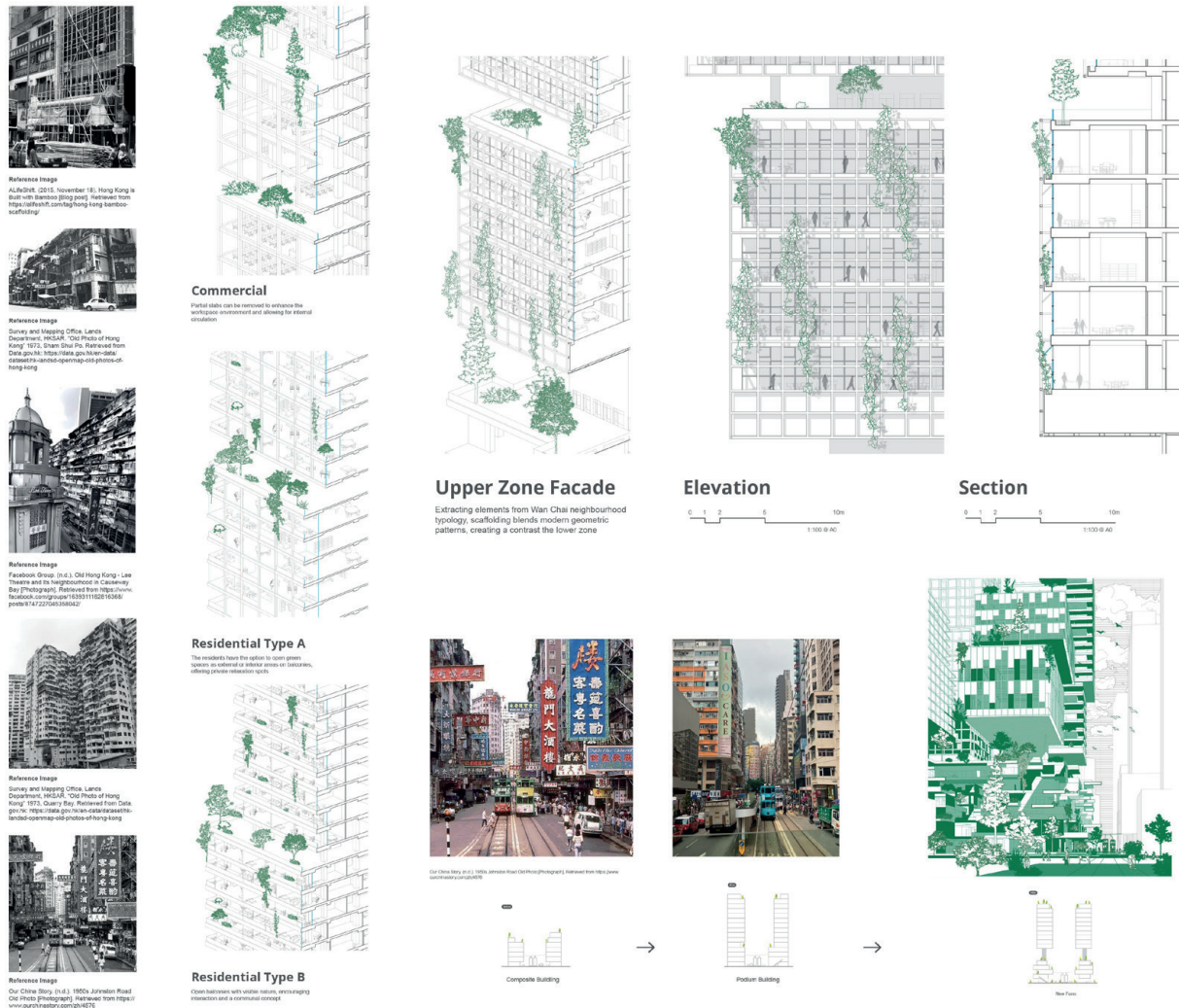


Figure 29. Upper Densification, Mixed Towers and Pocket Parks

The drawing shows how the upper densified zone echoes Wan Chai's surrounding urban language through facade elements, setbacks, terraces, and balcony rhythms. Four towers with different programmes are arranged as a mixed vertical neighbourhood, integrating pocket parks and shared terraces as communal spaces within the new density.

Source: Author, 2025.

Section

- 1 Node Plaza
- 2 Public Block - Access
- 3 Podium Garden
- 4 Residential Units
- 5 Public Swimming Pool
- 6 Public Library
- 7 Pocket Park
- 8 Rooftop Garden
- 9 Car Park
- 10 Hennessy Road
- 11 Johnston Road
- 12 MTR Railway

Section



Figure 30. Separated Upper Densification Zone, Wan Chai
Section drawings showing the separated densified upper zone, designed to accommodate additional floor area while minimising disturbance to the lower streetscape, pedestrian scale, and everyday public spaces. Source: drawing by Author



Figure 31. Projective Isometric View of Wan Chai

An overall isometric drawing of an imagined Wan Chai, showing a user-defined and generative urban environment with vibrant streets, a central node, community hubs, and shared spaces that invite people to experience and engage with street life. Source: Author, 2025.



Figure 32. When Densification Meets Community Essence, Wan Chai
When densification meets community essence as the tramline flows by. The drawing presents a view of urban dynamism and community cohesion, capturing how new density, everyday movement, and local street life can coexist within Wan Chai's evolving urban fabric.
Source: Author, 2025.



Figure 33-35. Central Node Plaza and Reimagined Tong Lau Communal Space

Central Node Plaza serves as a breathing space amidst the urban hustle, inviting users to pause, gather, and reconnect with nature at the heart of the city. Across the surrounding inner streets, diverse activities, nodes, and levels create a vibrant communal environment, where everyday users and families meander through the reimagined Tong Lau spaces and experience the shared life, greenery, and urban cohesion of the district. Source: Author, 2025.

In reflection, the Wan Chai project does not reject podium urbanism entirely. Something that exists at such scale must have its reasons: efficiency, development incentive, weather protection, circulation, and the need to accommodate density. The project therefore does not propose a completely alternative model, but attempts to live with this reality and imagine an enhanced version of it. Its aim is to accept density while reshaping the podium condition into a more respectful urban layer, where added floor area can coexist with street life, mixed uses, neighbourhood memory, and everyday human scale.

5. Design Study II – Sheung Shui

The second design study takes an almost opposite approach to Wan Chai. While Wan Chai works through separation, preservation, and careful layering, Sheung Shui tests whether community can be formed by embracing what design often tries to avoid: conflict, discomfort,

overlap, and imperfection. Instead of protecting an existing identity from pressure, the project asks how new public housing can generate shared life through friction, negotiation, and an open ground condition.

Framed within the Northern Metropolis context, Sheung Shui is a border-side neighbourhood anchored by Shek Wu Hui, market streets, villages, rural edges, transport flows, and shifting retail patterns. The selected site could easily become another hyper-dense podium-tower estate; while three compact housing blocks may deliver units efficiently, they risk consuming the ground, cutting off the extension of market life, and producing a sanitised housing island connected mainly by point-to-point circulation.

Against this, the project reimagines public housing as a more fragmented, mixed, and gradual form of density. Instead of treating housing as an isolated object, it asks whether a new estate can



Figure 36-38. Parallel Trading and Local Contestation in Sheung Shui

A series of images showing Sheung Shui before COVID-19, when parallel-trading activity intensified street congestion, pharmacy-oriented retail, and local protest. The images frame Sheung Shui as a contested border district, where external buying power, pedestrian crowding, and everyday neighbourhood disturbance reshaped the local street economy and public life.

Sources: Hong Kong Free Press, 2016; North District Parallel Imports Concern Group / ResearchGate; Facebook image source, accessed 2026.

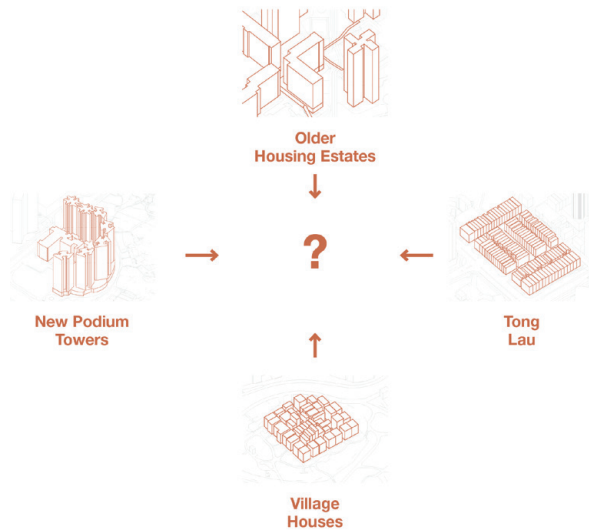


Figure 39. Toward a New Shared Ground Housing Typology

The diagram compares four familiar Hong Kong housing typologies: old public housing estates, Tong Lau, village houses, and newer podium tower developments. Drawing from their different spatial qualities, including shared estate grounds, mixed use street edges, village like thresholds, and podium efficiency, the project proposes a blended social housing typology. It evolves inherited urban languages into a more empathetic and inclusive model, where density, mixed programmes, claimable thresholds, and shared ground support encounter and community life.

Source: Author, 2026.

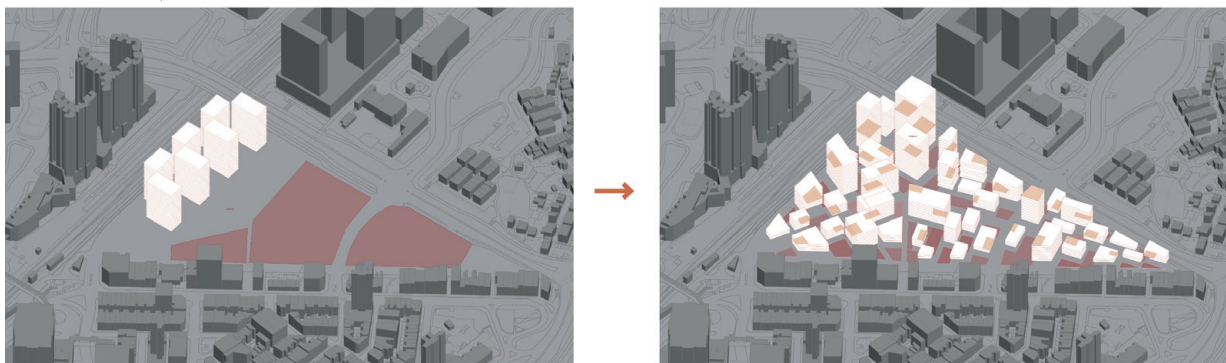


Figure 40. From Podium Towers to Ground as Living Room

A before-and-after design diagram contrasting a typical three-tower podium estate with a reimagined public housing model of fragmented density, varied open spaces, and a more dynamic ground condition. The proposal turns the ground from a servicing base into a shared living room for encounter, movement, and everyday use.

Source: Author, 2026.

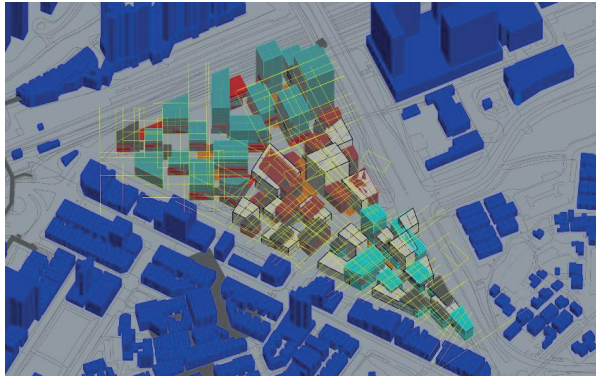


Figure 41. Massing Development and Mixed Urban Variety

A screenshot of the project's massing development process, testing variety in density, unit size, programmes, and open-space formats, exploring how a public housing prototype can move away from uniform block logic towards a more gradual, mixed, and socially adaptable urban form.

Source: Author, 2026.

to the border, its urban structure often prioritises interchange efficiency over civic space. Pedestrian movement is channelled through elevated footbridges, station connections, bus interchanges, road crossings, and leftover ground spaces, creating a condition where the city is easy to pass through but less generous to stay in.

This produces a fragmented ground. Open spaces become shortcuts, streets are shaped by traffic pressure, and daily movement is often reduced to point-to-point circulation. The pedestrian network may be connected, but connection alone does not create community. Without places to pause, gather, wait, watch, or overlap, neighbourhood life remains thin, even when density is high.

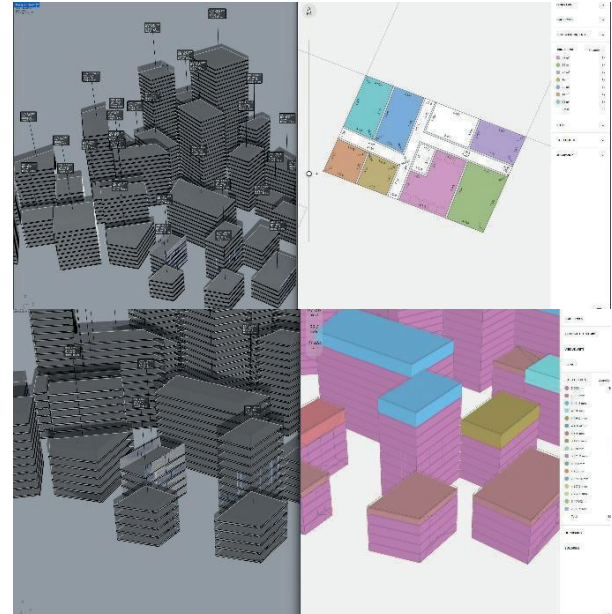


Figure 42. AI-Assisted Unit Mix and Corridor Layout Study

A design study processed with Finch, testing the mix and assignment of programmes, unit sizes, corridors, fire escapes, services, and access cores within each building mass. The study supports the project's attempt to organise public housing as a varied and workable system, balancing spatial diversity with circulation, servicing, and regulatory constraints.

Source: Author, 2026; study assisted by Finch.

The district's retail life also reflects this tension. Parallel-trading pressure once intensified demand for pharmacies and daily goods, shifting parts of the local economy towards external buying power rather than everyday neighbourhood needs.

This tension matters because friction can reveal needs that a smoother environment would hide.



Figure 43. Programmed Landscape Park as Shortcut, Sheung Shui

A typical landscape park in Sheung Shui, organised by paths, planting, and intended recreational programmes. Although the space provides trees and greenery, locals often pass through it as a shortcut rather than occupy it as an open public space.

Source: Author, 2026.

Like a relationship where avoiding all arguments may also avoid deeper honesty, a city that removes every discomfort may lose chances for adjustment, care, and mutual understanding. In Sheung Shui, the existing conflicts are therefore not only obstacles, but clues: they expose where different users, fears, habits, and vulnerabilities already meet, and where design might turn tension into longer-lasting social value.

After COVID-19, vacancies, shop relocations, and younger operators testing new formats suggest that Sheung Shui is now recalibrating its street life. The question is therefore not only how to add housing, but how new density can reconnect with this unsettled urban condition



Figure 44. Festival Hawkers and Informal Gathering on the Street

During Chinese New Year, temporary hawkers and festival crowds gather along pedestrian paths that were not designed as pocket spaces. Although such street occupation is often controlled, narrowed, or restricted to prevent crowd accumulation, the scene reveals that the demand for informal gathering, seasonal exchange, and street-based public life still persists within the managed city.

Source: HK01, “《彩園不死》上水小販重覓地點擺檔”, 2017.



Figure 45. Sheung Shui Business in Transition

A long-standing local shop in Sheung Shui closes amid changing retail patterns, reflecting the district's ongoing transition from traditional neighbourhood commerce toward a more uncertain street economy.

Source: The Standard, “Farewell to a local landmark: Sheung Shui's bamboo mat shop ends half-century operations,” 2025.

without becoming another isolated podium environment that encourage just point-to-point circulation of the city.

5.2. Ground as shared living room

The proposal reclaims the ground as a negotiated living room rather than a leftover space beneath housing blocks. Instead of treating open space as circulation, landscape buffer, or visual amenity, the project uses the ground as the main social interface between the new estate and the existing neighbourhood.

This is developed through interlocking pockets, route hierarchies, courtyards, retail setbacks, and deliberately under-defined zones. Busy routes absorb commuter flows, while second-

ary paths, corners, and pocket spaces allow slower forms of use: waiting, resting, watching, queuing, informal vending, children playing, or neighbours gathering. These spaces are not fully programmed, because their value lies in allowing different users to claim, time-share, and re-interpret them.

5.3. Semi-open corridor commons

Residential corridors are reimagined as semi-open commons rather than sealed efficiency passages. Inspired by Marina Bay Sands in Singapore, where hotel room corridors connect directly into an interior retail world, creating a psychological shift in how circulation feels and is “shared/ owned”.



Figure 46. Existing Spatial Conditions of Occupation in Sheung Shui

The drawing analyses spatial conditions in Sheung Shui where everyday occupation already takes place, including alley corners, streets of varying widths, flow pockets, overlapping street-program interfaces, and active fronts. Together, these conditions show how pedestrian movement, pausing, and informal occupation tend to gather where routes widen, intersect, or meet shopfronts and other active building edges.

Source: Author, 2026.



Figure 47. Connectivity Analysis of the Sheung Shui Site

A site connectivity analysis produced by the author using UrbanFab, a Rhino/Grasshopper plugin developed by Adaptive Design Lab. Similar to space syntax logic, the diagram scores and visualises the relative connectivity of routes across the site, providing a base reference for locating major flows, potential interfaces, and areas where public life may accumulate. Source: Author, 2026; analysis generated with UrbanFab by Adaptive Design Lab.



Figure 48. Central Link and Pocket Flows, Mangalem 21

A reference image from OMA's Mangalem 21 masterplan proposal in Tirana, Albania. The image is read for its use of a key central link, with connected pockets that absorb secondary movement and create moments of pause along the main flow. It serves as a precedent for organising circulation as both connection and social space. Source: OMA, Mangalem 21 masterplan proposal, video still, accessed 2026.

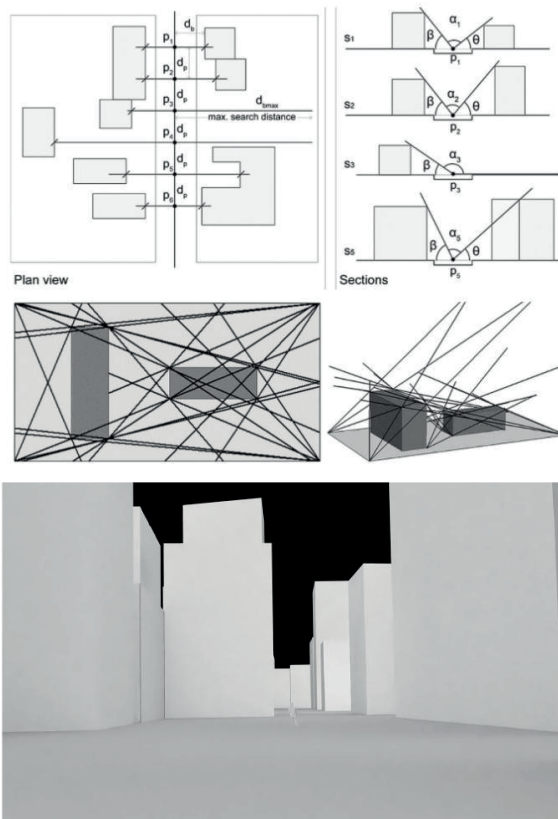


Figure 49. Spatial Enclosure Analysis Methods

Two reference diagrams from *Modelling 3D Spatial Enclosure of Urban Open Spaces* show methods for measuring enclosure through road centrelines and 3D axial lines. They are used here to support the project's testing of varied spatial conditions, from open routes to sheltered pockets and semi-enclosed edges.

Source: Mutlu and Yilmaz, *Modelling 3D Spatial Enclosure of Urban Open Spaces*, 2016; after Schroder, Mackness and Reitsma, 2007.

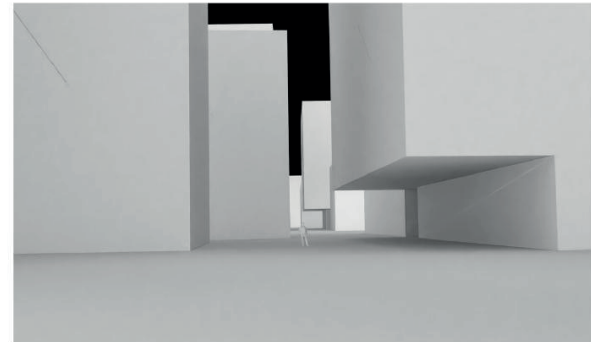
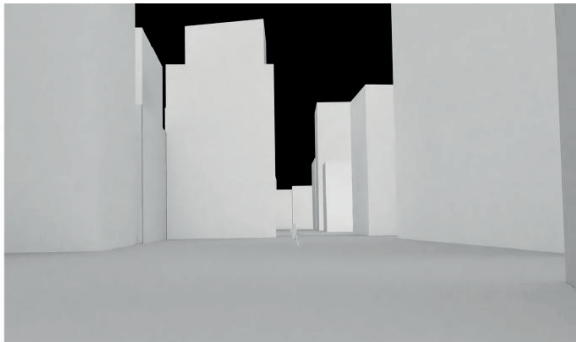


Figure 50. Street-Level Enclosure Before and After Development

A paired comparison of the same street scene with and without the proposed building mass. The images test how new development changes the perceived sense of enclosure from street level, showing how building edges, height, setbacks, and spatial proportion can affect pedestrian experience, comfort, and urban spatiality.

Source: Author, 2026.

Instead of functioning only as access to units, the corridors share light, air, visibility, and spatial continuity with the second-floor everyday retail podium. This turns circulation into a lived threshold between housing and public life, where residents can pause, watch, meet neighbours, and remain connected to the activities below.

The corridor is therefore becoming not simply a route, but a social interface. By combining ventilation, wider pockets, visual overlap, inter-surveillance, and indirect links to everyday shops and services, it supports informal encounter and helps transform the housing block from a stack of private units into a more open and recognisable community structure.

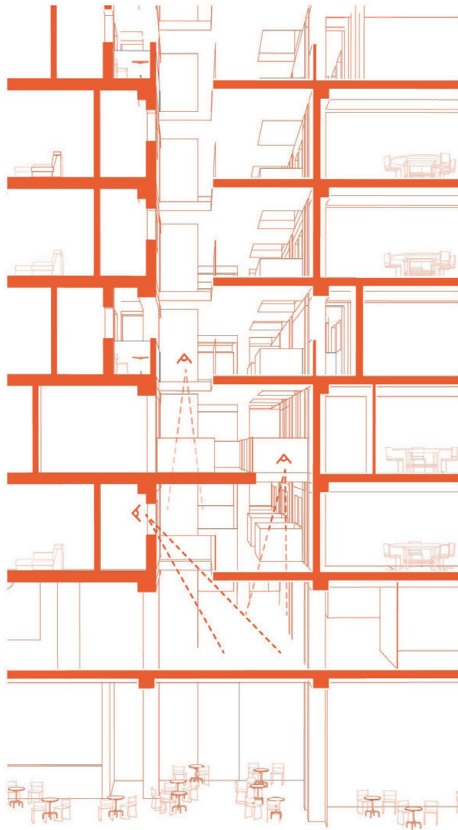


Figure 51. Open Corridor Commons and Second-Level Retail Connection

The drawing shows the project's attempt to open residential corridors and connect them indirectly to the second-level retail podium. Unlike typical enclosed public housing corridors, this semi-open arrangement creates a psychological shift in what feels private, shared, or publicly accessible. Circulation becomes a lived threshold, where residents can pause, observe, and feel connected to everyday activity beyond their own units.

Source: Author, 2026.

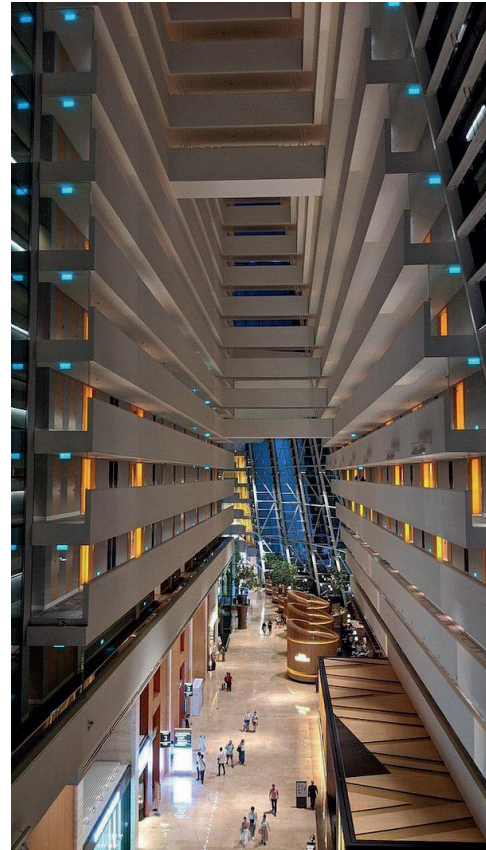


Figure 52. Hotel Corridor and Retail Interior as Shared Threshold, Marina Bay Sands

This image is used as a reference for the psychological shift created when hotel-room circulation connects directly to a large interior retail world. Unlike a typical enclosed hotel or housing corridor, where stepping out may still feel semi-private and casual, this condition makes the corridor feel immediately connected to public activity. The boundary between what is private, shared, and publicly accessible becomes less fixed, inspiring the project's rethinking of public housing corridors as semi-open commons.

Source: Tripadvisor, Sands Expo and Convention Centre, Singapore, accessed 2026.

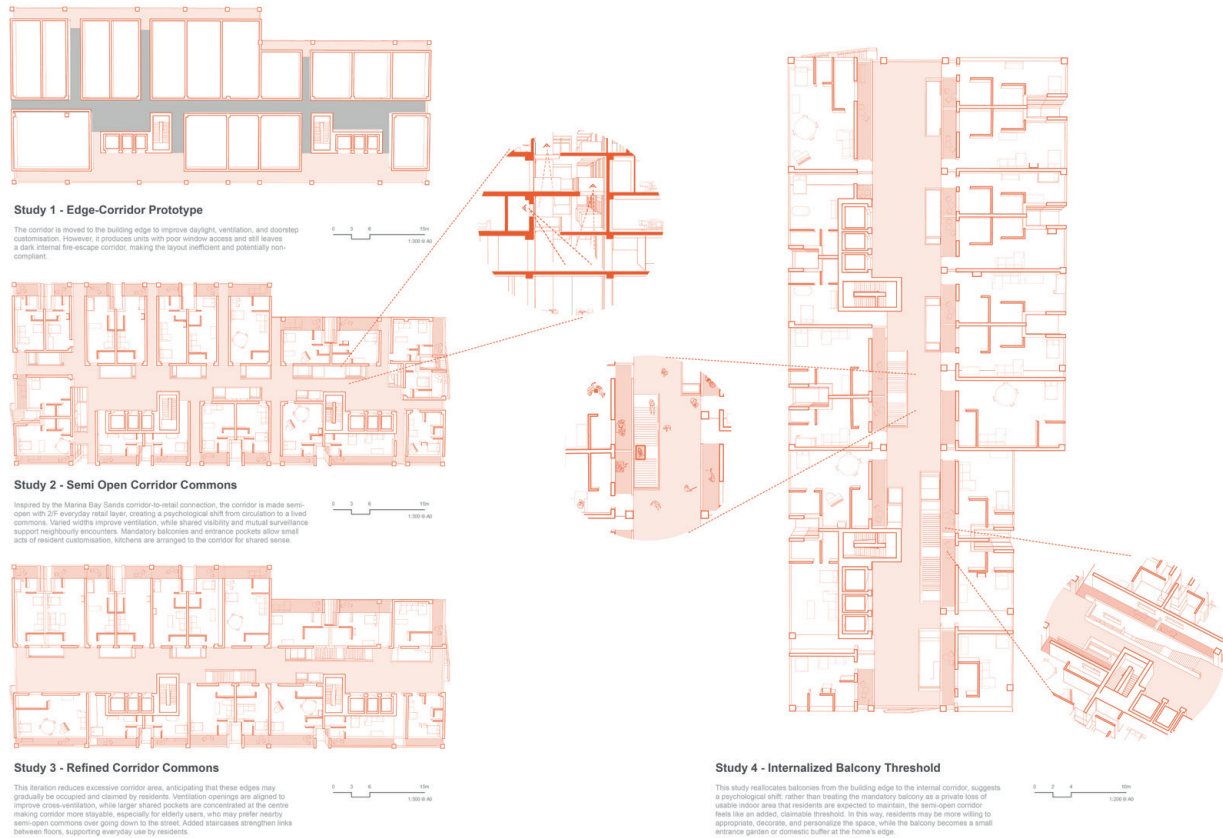


Figure 53. Semi-open Corridor, Balcony and Unit Layout Studies

A series of design studies testing semi-open corridor arrangements, balcony placement, and flat layouts. The diagrams explore how balconies can shift from isolated private add-ons to claimable thresholds along shared corridors, creating more opportunities for ventilation, visibility, neighbourly pause, and everyday personalisation.

Source: Author, 2026.



Figure 54. Corridor Commons and Claimable Thresholds

These two reference images show corridors and access spaces that operate beyond simple circulation. In Footbridge on the Water Residential Building, the walkway becomes both access and outdoor living space, supporting views, leisure, social interaction and a sense of togetherness. Creative City Neu Marx is read as a reference for a more informal corridor common, where people can stay, linger, display objects and personalise shared edges.

Source: LOVE architecture and urbanism, Footbridge on the Water Residential Building, ArchDaily, photographs by Jasmin Schuller, 2021; Patricia Baginski, Creative City Neu Marx, Behance, 2017.



Figure 55. Ventilated Corridor Logic in Early Hong Kong Public Housing

Ming Wah Dai Ha shows an early public housing model with central corridors facing an open atrium. Wire mesh edges allow light, ventilation and visual connection, forming a semi open access space rather than a sealed corridor. However, without mixed retail or public programmes, corridor customisation can remain unsupported, sometimes becoming neglected space rather than an active threshold for everyday use and neighbourly interaction.

Source: HK Estate, “廊走過明華大廈”, Facebook photograph of Ming Wah Dai Ha, 2014, accessed 2026.

5.4. Balconies as claimable thresholds

Mandatory balconies are suggested in this project as small but deliberate triggers for personalisation and domestic spill-out. Through iterative tests and use scenarios, the design moves them away from the typical position at the end of each flat, where balconies often become storage rooms or neglected extra space. Instead, they are placed along the semi-open corridor, turning each balcony into a vertical version of a front garden: a claimable zone at the unit entrance, supported by wider corridor pockets, better ventilation, and spaces where neighbours can pause and linger.

Connected to the corridor commons, these balconies create a subtle system of mutual visibility. Residents can personalise their thresholds with plants, chairs, laundry, decorations, or small daily objects, while the presence of neighbours provides a soft form of care, awareness, and self-regulation. The balcony is therefore not only private spill-out, but a semi-public interface between the home and the shared estate environment.

Over time, these front-garden-like thresholds allow the housing block to become less generic. Daily gestures of use, display, maintenance, and informal watching accumulate into memory, helping residents recognise one another and gradually complete the estate through everyday life.



Figure 56. Deliberate Balconies as Customisation Capacity

The drawing shows intentionally provided balconies as spaces for residents to customise, plant, decorate, store, and spill everyday life outward. Rather than treating balconies as luxury or leftover space, the project uses them as adaptable buffers that invite users to shape their own thresholds.

Source: Author, 2026.

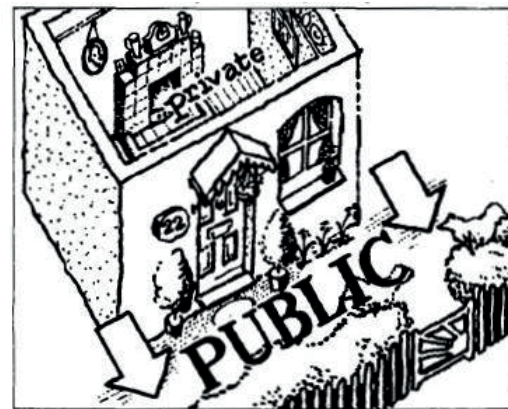


Figure 57. Public–Private Thresholds and Personalisation
A diagram from *Responsive Environments* showing how personalisation often occurs at the threshold between public and private space, where users can adapt visible and claimable edges.

Source: Bentley et al., *Responsive Environments: A Manual for Designers*, 1985.

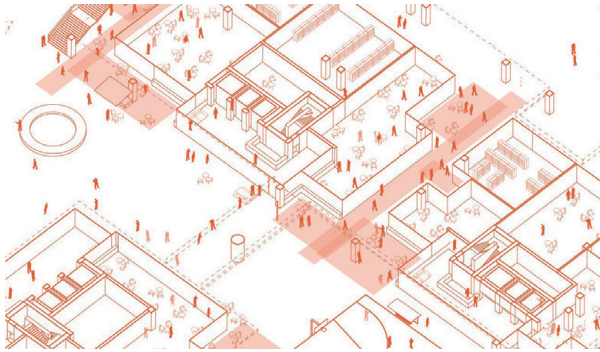


Figure 58. Under-defined Pockets as Spaces for Negotiation

The drawing shows under-defined pockets left between routes, columns, shaded edges, and building fronts. Inspired by the way activity in Sheung Shui settles like river sediment where pedestrian flow slows down, these spaces are designed to remain open for residents and passers-by to pause, claim, negotiate, and gradually shape through everyday use.

Source: Author, 2026.

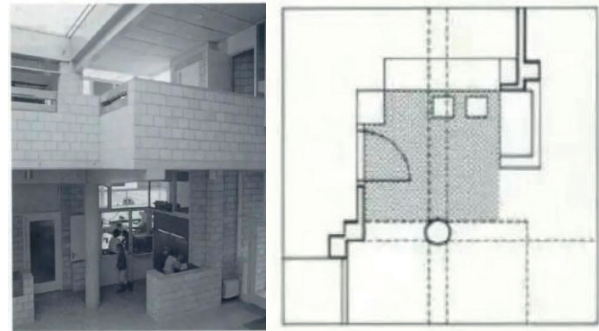


Figure 59. Making Space, Leaving Space

An example from Herman Hertzberger's *Lessons for Students in Architecture*, showing how the space between classrooms is opened up and used as a porch-like area for occupation. Rather than defining the corridor only as circulation, the design leaves a degree of openness and ambiguity, allowing students to pause, gather, and appropriate the threshold between rooms.

Source: Hertzberger, H., *Lessons for Students in Architecture*, 1991

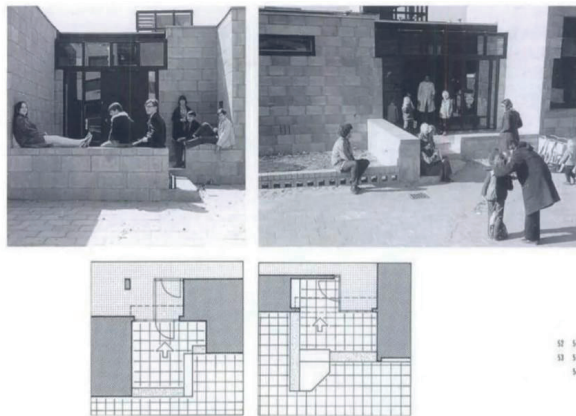


Figure 60. Occupied Pockets and Everyday Appropriation

An example from Herman Hertzberger's *Lessons for Students in Architecture*, showing how simple architectural elements, such as a parapet wall, edge, or pocket-like threshold, can generate informal occupation. Rather than prescribing a fixed programme, the space offers the right degree of openness and support, allowing people to naturally gather, sit, chat, and appropriate it for different activities over time.

Source: Hertzberger, H., *Lessons for Students in Architecture*, 1991.

5.5. Making Space, Leaving Space

Memory through negotiation among underdefined spaces

Echoing Herman Hertzberger's idea of "making space, leaving space," the project deliberately leaves pockets between routes and building edges for life to settle. These spaces are inspired by the way activity in Sheung Shui accumulates like river sediment where pedestrian flow slows down.

Rather than assigning every area a fixed function, columns, shaded shelter zones, retail edges, widened corners, and under-defined pockets are left open for residents and passers-by to pause, wait, linger, claim, and negotiate. They may support queuing, resting, informal chatting, children playing, temporary displays, or small acts of care between neighbours.

Memory is therefore produced through repeated use and adjustment. As different users return, share, and gradually territorialise these pockets, the estate accumulates recognisable habits and social anchors. Community is not fully designed in advance; it is made possible by the spaces that architecture carefully leaves open.

6. Conclusion

Incompletion as empathy

Wan Chai project shows empathy through contextual differentiation. The project asks how new density can be added without erasing the street-level fabric that carries neighbourhood identity: mixed programmes, small shops, nar-

row streets, tramline rhythm, informal conversations, and everyday routines. Its empathy lies in recognising that community memory is already embedded in the district, and that development should be carefully layered around it rather than replacing it with a generic image of urban renewal.

Sheung Shui project, by contrast, shows empathy through friction, variety, under-defined pockets, and memory-building interfaces. Instead of preserving an existing identity, the project tests how a new public housing community might form beside an already contested neighbourhood. Its strategy is not to design conflict away, but to provide spatial conditions where different users can overlap, pause, claim, adjust, and gradually recognise one another.

Together, the two projects argue for a broader understanding of urban infrastructure. Hong Kong does not only need systems that move people efficiently through the city; it also needs social infrastructure that gives people reasons to stay, return, negotiate, and remember. If physical infrastructure supports movement, social infrastructure supports belonging.

Incompletion therefore becomes part of the empathetic position. A city that is fully defined in advance, without problems, may be easier to manage, but it leaves little room for users to appropriate, interpret, grow, learn, and complete it through everyday life. The aim is not to design less, but to design with enough openness for future use, conflict, care, and memory to enter. The projects remain unfinished and as a continuous enquiry, not as a weakness, but as

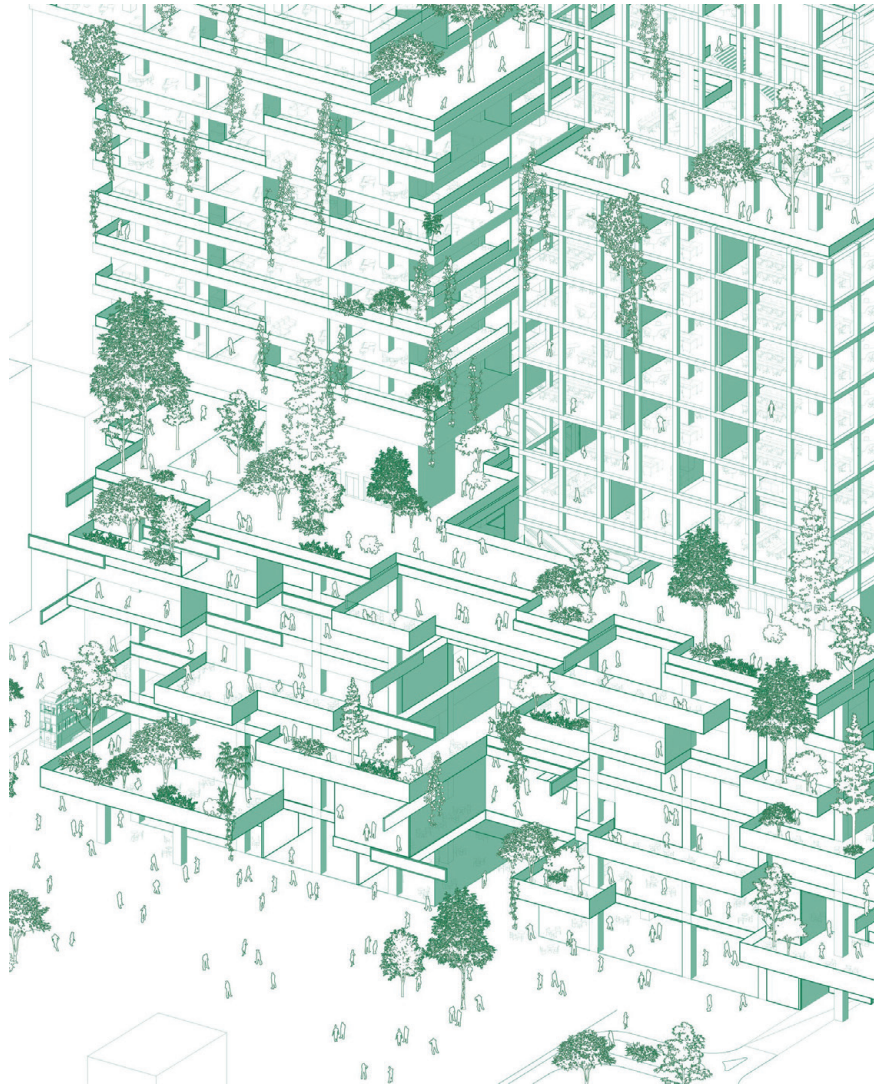


Figure 61. Visionary Densification and Street-Level Continuity, Wan Chai

A cover drawing representing the Wan Chai project, showing a clear distinction between the densified upper zone and the maintained street-level fabric below. Rather than rejecting density or simply reproducing another form of podium urbanism, the drawing imagines a more empathetic development model: one that learns to live with density while protecting human scale, mixed uses, and everyday street life. Density is therefore framed not as a problem in itself, but as a condition that can support community when carefully integrated with the ground.

Source: Author, 2025

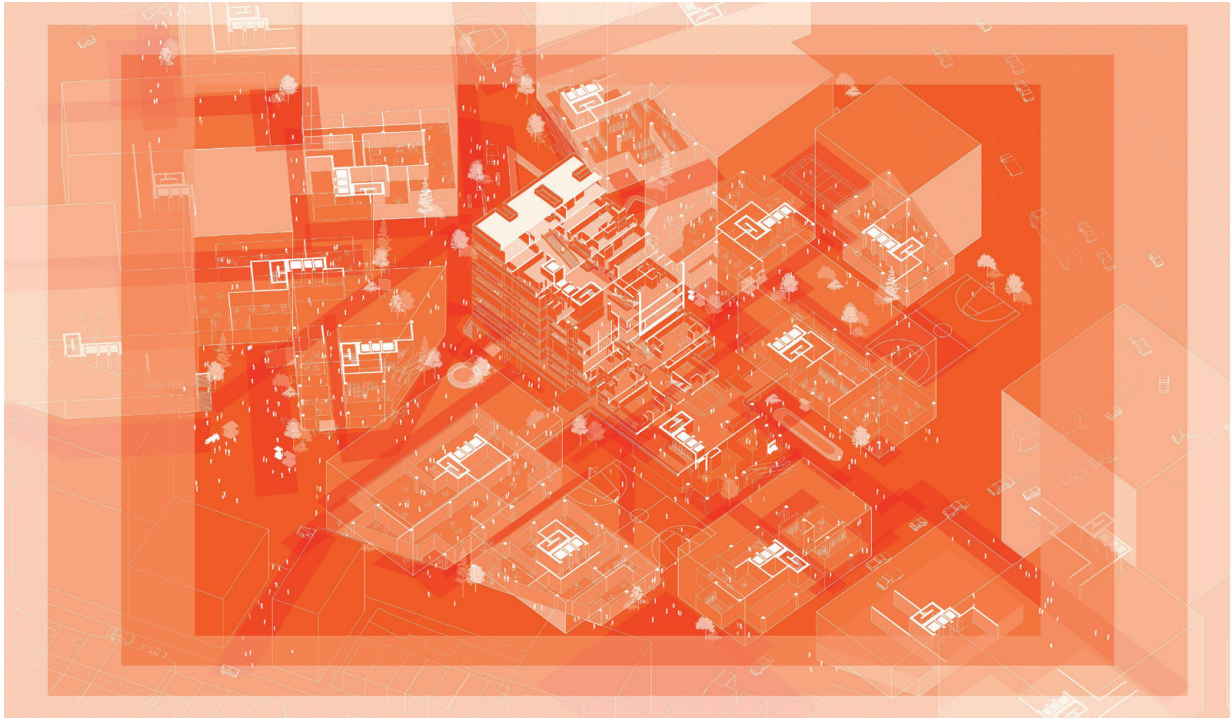


Figure 62. A Slice of Everyday Life, Sheung Shui

A cover isometric drawing of the proposed public housing prototype in Sheung Shui. Rather than presenting the estate as a sealed and isolated housing block, the drawing imagines a more open and negotiated form of living: semi-open residential corridors connect to the second-floor podium, the ground becomes a shared living room, and interlocking open spaces create pockets for everyday claiming, encounter, and informal appropriation. The fading orange edge suggests this logic as a transferable attitude, where mixed variety, ground-level occupation, and shared vulnerability can gradually extend into surrounding plots and future developments. Source: Author, 2026.

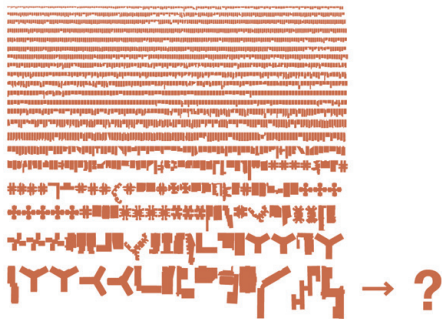


Figure 63. Re-sorting the Ground: What Next?

This recap diagram extends the insight from the Sheung Shui massing study: newer developments tend to occupy larger and more continuous ground coverage, reducing shared and reachable urban ground. It raises a further question for future development: how can the next generation reclaim the ground as a place for pause, encounter, and shared life, rather than allowing it to become only building mass and circulation?

Source: Author, 2026.

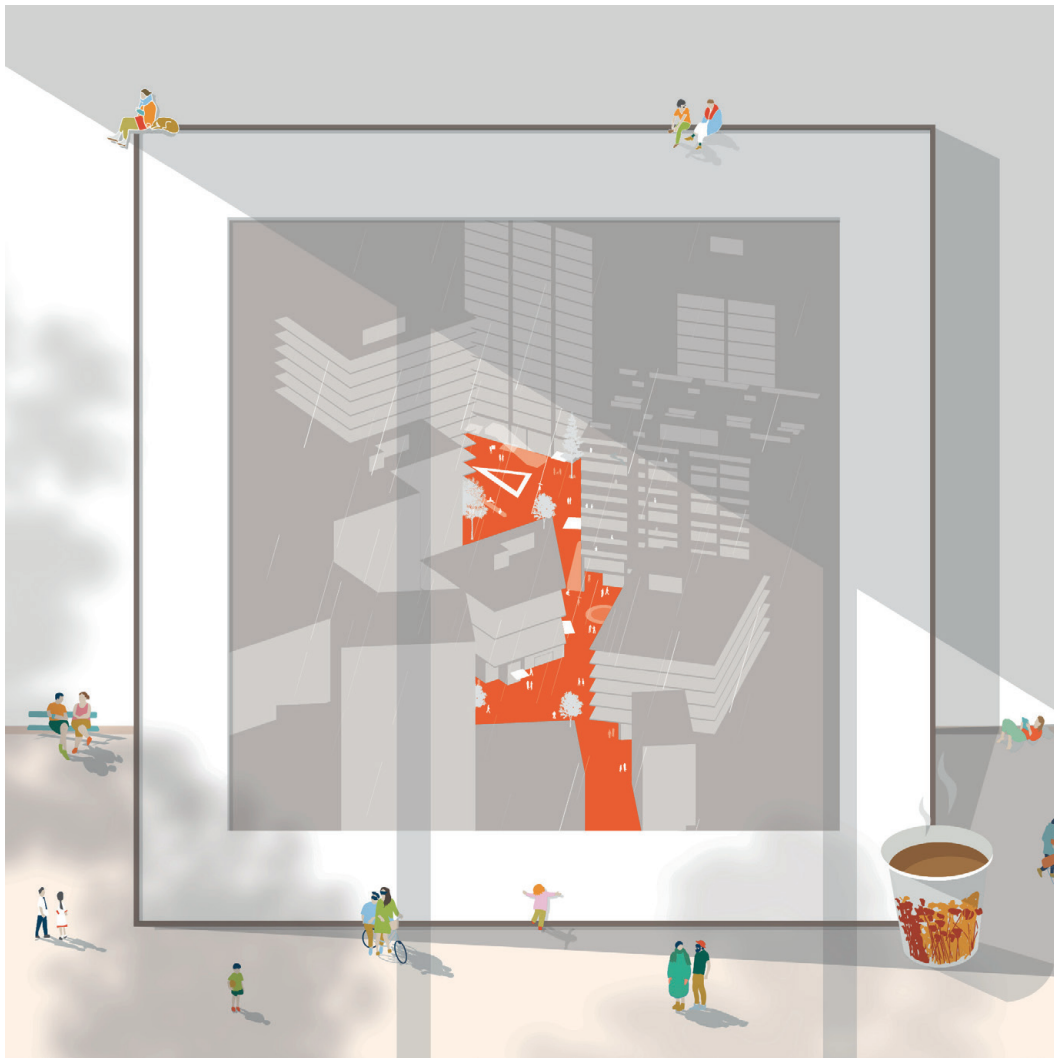


Figure 64. Weather as a Temporary Common Finished size: 440 × 440 mm | Digital illustration with simulated paper texture and overlaid white linework

Unexpected rain turns street into a shared shelter. Umbrellas get borrowed, balconies call “Bring laundry in! 收衫喇!”, strangers pause together, and small kindness seed future familiarity, sense of belongings in community, the moment when hazard/ weather becomes cohesiveness.

The scene is inspired by a personal childhood memory in a cha chaan teng when facing sudden heavy rain, when an umbrella was offered without question.

Source: Author, 2026.

an invitation for people to continue shaping the city through engagements, appropriation, after architecture has set the conditions.

As suggested in the drawing “Weather as a Temporary Common”, rain is usually perceived as bad weather, inconvenience, or even hazard. Yet in the city, it can also become a moment of cohesiveness, people pause under the same shelter, share umbrellas, call out from balconies for reminding neighbours, and become aware of one another through shared discomfort, small kindness seeds future familiarity and sense of belongings to the community. What first appears as interruption may unexpectedly create care, cohesiveness, and collective memory.

The same may be true of urban friction and conflict.



Figure 65. When Hazard Reveals Care

A heavy-rain scene from a music video, where young people help elderly pedestrians through the storm. The image suggests that bad weather is not only disruption, it can also become a moment when kindness, attention, and mutual support appear more visibly in the city.

Source: YouTube music video, accessed 2026.



Figure 66. Cha Chaan Teng as Everyday Hong Kong Memory

A typical cha chaan teng scene, symbolising the everyday routines, conversations, and informal care embedded in Hong Kong's daily life.

Source: 原人, “永別 香港最美冰室——中國冰室,” 公民行動影音紀錄資料庫, 2019.

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