

Reconnecting Hong Kong in Time and Space

By Jing Lu¹ & Gang Wang²
Urban Planner & AIA, LEED ap

Abstract As a high-density compact city, Hong Kong carries the baggage of this, with a chronic shortage of easily accessible urban public open spaces. On the one hand, it leaves the stressful urban localities with no place for instant contact with nature; on the other hand, with a lasting impression of a 'shopping paradise' to the tourists, the micro-regeneration of urban public open spaces inevitably becomes tailored to the needs of shopping 'pilgrims'. Such changes jeopardize the uniqueness and cultural identity of Hong Kong, and there is a crying need to preserve cultural heritage in the already very crowded urban public spaces. Along with the industrial restructuring and spatial regeneration strategies proposed in the newly released Greater Bay Area Development Plan, more public space is potentially relieved in the urban core of Hong Kong. The authors argue that this is a great opportunity for Hong Kong to create a truly integrated urban trail system, which not only connects the underprivileged high-density dwellers to the green and blue spaces, but also offers an interconnected experience of routes that celebrate the cultural authenticity of Hong Kong.

Keywords: Contact with Nature, Cultural Heritage Preservation, Open Space Network

Without doubt, the newly released Greater Bay Area Development Plan (2019) by the China State Council signifies new opportunities and challenges for Hong Kong as an important leading player in the 'Greater Bay Area' (GBA). While reconsidering the industrial and spatial development in the overall GBA, it presumably provides regeneration potentials in the urban core of Hong Kong, especially ways of mitigating the over-crowdedness in urban public spaces brought by the high-density genes of Hong Kong.

No place for instant contact with nature

Hong Kong has long been known as a high-density compact city (Figure 1). A legacy of the compact city is a chronic shortage of easily accessible urban public open spaces (Jim and Chan, 2016). Within Hong Kong's country park system a statutory designation of 40% of the city's countryside as protected areas are expected to bear more recreational functions to mitigate the shortage of urban open



space (Jim and Chan, 2016; Cheung and Tang, 2016). However, with the high conservation and ecological value of country parks, encouraging recreational use leads to a higher risk of environmental deteriorations, e.g. hill fires, vegetation damage and etc. (Cheung 2013; Jim 1986, 1989; Cheung and Tang, 2016)

There is no doubt that the urban population spend most of their time living, working, playing and relaxing in urban areas. Given such already low-level per-capita urban green space provision in urban Hong Kong (Jim and Chan, 2016), the quality and distribution of these urban green spaces also calls for caution. The current zoning system of Hong Kong allows a wide range of other uses within open space zones as long as such applied uses are considered essential to the community. Cheung and Tang (2016) argues that urban open space tends to act as public land reserved for all sorts of community uses rather than serving the original planning intention of recreation. Tang (2017) found that the distribution of public open space in Hong Kong is not equitable: a large proportion of Hong Kong's open spaces, especially those with waterfront access, were located close to upmarket, low-density housing areas and mixed commercial-business zones, rather than high-density mass housing zones.

There is a growing concern in high-density cities that the large population and limited green open space might affect human health and well-being (Wong et.al, 2016; Xue et.al., 2017) According to biophilic hypothesis, human be-

ings have the innate tendency to contact with nature and other forms of life (Wilson, 1984). Sarkar, Webster and Gallacher (2018) have investigated highly dense urban areas and the associated reduced contact with natural environments has led to a rise in mental disorders, including depression. In a study carried out by Garrett and her colleagues (2019), they have found out that those Hong Kongers with a view of blue space from home and those visiting blue space regularly were more likely to report good general health, while intentional exposure was linked to greater odds of high wellbeing. In this sense, urban green and blue spaces are essential for urban dwellers' mental and physical health as they provide instant opportunities to contact with nature.

Room for celebrating Hong Kong's unique cultural authenticity

In this small, land-hungry city, land has always been an extremely valuable source (Tang, 2017). Coupled with being a tourism destination, public spaces in urban Hong Kong not only serves their localities, but are also expected to accommodate seasonal visitors, which pushes the scarcity of land to a further extreme. According to the latest Hong Kong tourism report (2018), Mainland Chinese tourists continued to be the largest visitor source, followed by tourists from Taiwan, South Korea and Japan. A study has shown that Hong Kong best attracts tourists from countries and districts with smaller culture distances in East Asia (Qian et.al, 2018). Being a tax-free city and offering a wide variety of goods, these



primary markets have considered Hong Kong to be a shopping paradise since the 1980s (Chan, 2016). Given the purchasing power of these tourists, the micro-regeneration of urban public spaces, especially the streetscape, is inevitably tailored to the needs of shopping ‘pilgrims’ (Figure 2). Such quick changes jeopardize the uniqueness of Hong Kong – its social fabric and cultural identity – its soul. As a result, it has triggered a strong sense of loss. There is also a nostalgia among local Hong Kongers who cry out for preserving Hong Kong’s culture heritage and a return to the more authentic ‘good old days’.

Due to historical causes, the culture of Hong Kong has long been unique, with a foundation rooted in China and strongly influenced by British colonialism (Qian et.al, 2018). It gave birth to a complicated but charming culture of Hong Kong as both traditional and modern:

Hong Kong mixes with both marketplace life and metropolitan norm, inheriting Chinese cultural heritage whilst actively incorporating an international urban culture. In her book of *Cities and Cinema*, Mennel (2016) pointed out the urban characteristic is the most significant part of Hong Kong culture, which sets Hong Kong apart from the culture of Mainland China. Despite the genres; Kungfu, Gangster or the art films of the New Wave (Mennel, 2016), the Hong Kong films produced during the peak age in the 1980s and 1990s were mostly shot in the urban settings (Qi, 2002). This unique culture of Hong Kong has widely influenced other places in Greater China and East Asia via its entertainment industry: Movies, Cantonese pop songs, TVB dramas and the like. Visitors to Hong Kong from these parts were largely exposed to or even grew up with these Hong Kong films, songs and TV shows during this peak production period.

Referring to the cultural heritage of a city, Ashworth (1998) describes it as a 'text' that can be interpreted. Tourists and local residents form their views on such cultural identity in different ways. The tourists' view of the city is influenced by pre-conceptions from literature, guidebooks, media and art, and tourists may overemphasise accounts of the 'Golden Age' (Breitung and Lu, 2016) of a particular place. These pre-conceptions may not be accurate, but they have a great impact on the place image. Tourists interpret the actual touristic experience through the lens of this artistic imaginary, and when their experience contradicts the pre-existing image, a 'lack of local identity' is conceived (Breitung and Lu, 2016). In contrast, the significant changes experienced within one generation lead to a feeling of loss, affecting the sense of history and sense of place within a locality. It may be small features such as colours, smells or building materials that evoke memories and symbolise place identities, community or certain periods of a person's life (Breitung and Lu, 2016).

Fortunately, such differences in interpretation between locals and tourists to Hong Kong may be small; and they may even reach an agreement on the 'Golden Age' to return to. Having shaped the imagination of an authentic urban Hong Kong amongst tourists, this perspective on the 'Golden Age' of the 1980s and 1990s might not align completely with that which has been memorized by the locals, but tourists and locals will probably agree on this important source of contemporary cultural authenticity.

Studies conducted in South Korea have confirmed the potency of a film-inspired nostalgia as an important motivation in tourism (Kim et.al, 2019). They also identified five domains of film nostalgia, including memories of backdrops, stories and movie stars, mimicking, envy, culture and history. From these domains, memories of backdrops and mimicking were found to be the best predictors of perceived familiarity with the films' original territory and of future travel intentions. In this regard, as it is blessed with such unique culture, Hong Kong could consider repositioning itself as a destination for cultural tourism, in addition to being a 'shopper's paradise', through an integrated urban design approach that celebrates its cultural heritage and provides space for an authentic experience of Hong Kong for both locals and tourists.

New opportunities from GBA integration

In the newly released Greater Bay Area Development Plan (2019) by the China State Council, Hong Kong is identified together with Shenzhen as one of the leading poles in the GBA. In the latest Conceptual Spatial Framework for Hong Kong 2030+ (2017), the planning authority has already proposed a northern economic belt along the border with Shenzhen. The plan identifies a new strategic growth area of New Territories North (NTN), with new town developments proposed at Heung Yuen Wai/Ping Che/Ta Kwu Ling/Hung Lung Hang/Queen's Hall. In providing these alternative living and working spaces to the urban cores of Central and Tsim

Sha Tsui, this GBA Plan also offers an opportunity to ease the tension and shortages of under-served public open spaces there.

The strategic positioning for Hong Kong in this GBA Plan is focused on financing, commerce, logistics and specialized-service industries (China State Council, 2019). What is missing is the strength that Hong Kong has as a cultural influencer and tourist destination. Given Hong Kong's unique status as a sub-cultural entity in the greater Chinese society, the challenge lies in how to grasp this new opportunity in industrial restructuring and spatial regeneration, while still holding on to the authentic taste of Hong Kong to strengthen its tourist industry and standing within contemporary culture. If done well, Hong Kong will not only be identified as the financial and service centre, but also still remembered as a beautiful cultural curator and tourism destination.

Interwoven touch of the authentic urban Hong Kong

In the Conceptual Spatial Framework for Hong Kong 2030+ (2017), in addition to the existing trails in the country parks, it proposed to expand a network of new open spaces at strategic waterfront locations and near commercial/business zones. However, such a concentration of green and blue networks may exacerbate the inequitable distribution of open spaces, and have little effect in providing open space access to those underprivileged communities. What is essential in open space planning and design is to create a green and blue network that is interconnected with

high-density zones; in this way, it offers urban pedestrian trails for all. As the new development takes place in the New Territories North (NTN), job opportunities will naturally attract more people to live and work there. Consequently, it will potentially leave more room for regeneration in the urban core of Hong Kong. By fully utilizing the existing green and blue spaces in the urban centre, together with future vacant lands it may be possible to create such an interconnected green and blue network with access to all. In this case, local communities will have a more equal opportunity for close contact with nature in a way mental and physical health.

Special attention is also required in adding ingredients of Hong Kong's authentic culture to these urban trails. Here again we can refer to Kim and his colleagues (2019) highlighting the role of nostalgia as a positive, social, and past-oriented emotion that evokes memories of previous happiness. These memories of backdrops and mimicking could inform the routing of urban trails, using a filmic sense of narrative mixed together with more natural ingredients. Similar to viewpoints along an elevated trail, there could be opportunities to mimic film clips at certain spots along the trails. In addition, potential vacant buildings and plazas after industrial restructuring can serve as new linkages points in the network and injected with cultural functions, such as remodelled as celebrity museums and retail areas designed to evoke nostalgia. With the help of the new technology such as Augmented Reality, both physical and vertical experience with the

imagined and memorized Hong Kong can be offered. Simple and creative ideas to capitalize on the significance of nostalgia will help enhance the destination appeal of Hong Kong.

The urban trails will help connect local communities to the beloved blue space, help restore local Hong Kongers to their memories of previous happiness and help mingle local communities and visitors through their shared taste of cultural authenticity. A more healing and appealing Hong Kong could be created for all to share.

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