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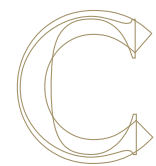
Deep
Water

Introduction

Deep Water

Public Spaces in Sham Shui Po

Jürgen Krusche



Claim, reclaim, occupy, enlarge, and extend—these terms come up frequently in Hong Kong. The reclamation of land from the harbour is an old practice in Hong Kong. Large parts of the city are built on ground that did not exist 100 years ago. The temple for Tin Hau, the goddess of the sea, that was erected in 1901 at Yee Kuk Street in Sham Shui Po once afforded a view of the sea. Today, the sea goddess looks out at old refrigerators, flat screen televisions, and other used electronic goods (*fig 1*). Yee Kuk Street is in the hands of the second-hand electronics dealers; they often claim the whole street entirely.



Stores stretch out to the kerb, and often extend into the street, occupying public space.

Just like everywhere else in Hong Kong, Sham Shui Po is too narrow, with apartments, stores, even many parks which are used as public spaces being extremely small. Every square metre must be used. The pavement, as well as the street, become welcome areas for expansion of stores or workshops. Stretching out, extending, and claiming have thus become phenomena that one encounters constantly. However, often that which has been expanded and extended must be packed up again. Goods must be stored back in the shops in the evenings, stalls opulently filled with merchandise during the day must be closed and carefully locked up. It is a constant

spreading out, expanding, and then contracting and packing up that takes place here on the street. Sham Shui Po works like a living organism attempting to make the most efficient use of a small amount of space.

Sham Shui Po is the poorest district in Hong Kong, and a street hawker's paradise. Numerous street markets sell everything one could imagine needing in one's daily life, determining the district's image. However, it is not just the licensed hawker stalls that make up the markets, but also a second wave of sellers. In the evening, as the official stalls slowly end their day, migrants from Southern Asia, Pakistan, India, or Mainland China come with their belongings, arranging them for sale on the side of the street.



Occasionally, official stalls are used for these purposes as well. As one group packs up, the other is just setting up: on handcarts, trolleys, in suitcases and plastic bags. Those who can afford it come with delivery trucks whose doors will be opened and reconfigured into makeshift storefronts (*fig 2*).

On Kweilin Street, south of the Sham Shui Po MTR Station, one can clearly observe these temporary and visibly distinguishable ways in which a "production of space" (a concept introduced by philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre) takes place. First there are shops and restaurants on the ground floor that often spill out onto the pavement. Then the official market stalls on the streets, normally run by Hong Kong people. Finally, there are the improvised stalls of the "outcasts", who subsist on the spatio-temporal "edges" of the formal economy. This shadow economy skillfully manoeuvres between legality and illegality, and is dominated by a high level of informality.

The latter can also be observed by the lighting of these stalls. Most of these stalls do not have any electricity, thus, are very poorly lit. Patrons therefore, show up with torches in order to better inspect the wares. Relative to other areas of the city, Sham Shui Po at night is relatively dark, something that one would not normally expect from neon-filled Hong Kong (*page 141*). This shifting usage of space between day and night, along with the corresponding change in atmosphere is typical of the neighbourhood. The expansion, spreading out, and opening, as well as the packing up and closing, are all temporal phenomena that determine the rhythm and image of the city, especially in Sham Shui Po.

It is often unclear, if what is happening is legal or not, allowed or forbidden, wanted or unwanted. This unclear and ambivalent situation is particularly

characteristic of Sham Shui Po. Is it permitted to expand one's shop out to the street? Is the carpentry workshop allowed to carry out its work on the pavement blocking access to the warehouse, the market stall, and the pavement? The apparent rule seems to be that everything is okay, as long as nobody complains. Thus, homeless people are allowed to leave their belongings in front of a clothing store, and the trash-pickers can store their collected items on the pavement. Unlike the parks, which count as public space and where much is forbidden, there seem to be fewer regulations governing markets and streets. People know each other and come to terms with each other. The use of public space in these cases is governed from person to person, be it for storage, as a workshop, store, or a restaurant (*page 62-69*). In any case, it constitutes what we are interested in studying in the context of this research project, namely the negotiation and bargaining of urban public space: what we call "politics of space".

Welcome to Sham Shui Po

From our immediate first impressions of Sham Shui Po, it is clear that the situation in which Hong Kong residents find themselves is not an easy one, and that space seems to play a central role. In the taxi ride from the airport to our apartment on the very first evening, we already learned a great deal just from a conversation with our taxi driver. Mr Wang, who is 61 years old, drove us through Sham Shui Po showing us where the homeless people live, and which buildings were currently empty and soon to be demolished. It appeared he does not make very much money: he only drives his taxi at night, and lives in a very small apartment. He was complaining that one has to work much harder in Hong Kong than in Mainland China — every day in fact, with hardly a day off. We wanted to meet him again and interview him; he was excited at the prospect, and gave us his cellphone number.

We began exploring the neighbourhood as soon as we arrived at the apartment. It was

approximately eight o'clock in the evening when we arrived, and we soon met a man standing in front of his shop on Boundary Street (fig 3). He only opens his shop from eight in the evening, working somewhere else during the day. The store is filled to the ceiling and all the way to the outer front edge with his wares: screws, wires, pipes, old tools, a compressor, plastic buckets,

mostly old things piled on top of one another. "One used to be able to go into the store," he told us. He was sipping a beer next to his shop, sitting on a stool, and waiting for customers.

On our way back to the apartment at around nine o'clock, we see an old woman near Yu Chau Street. She paused for a moment, dug an old newspaper out of her bag, stooped to the kerb, collected three or four aluminium cans, which she wrapped in the newspaper and carried them off. These three people who we met and spoke with on our first evening in Sham Shui Po represented a specific group of people living in Hong Kong, with whom we would frequently come into contact, namely those in precarious living conditions. They are forced to work either at multiple jobs or long hours at one job. Some have no choice but to collect recyclable materials off the street in order to survive. They live either in extremely small quarters and have set up their businesses in the smallest amount of space possible. These were phenomena that we frequently encountered later, and which we studied and immersed ourselves in during our trip.

Our first taxi trip also raised another phenomenon, which has become an issue even for such a relatively secluded neighbourhood: gentrification. Many old buildings lay empty, about to be torn down in order to build expensive new condominiums, examples of which already dot the Sham Shui Po landscape in growing numbers.

The Research Project

Researchers and artists from the Hong Kong Polytechnic University School of Design and the Zurich University of the Arts worked together between

2014 and 2016 on the Politics of Space research project, later called Deep Water. They chose a small area of Sham Shui Po, one of the most traditional districts still remaining in Hong Kong, and investigated public space in the neighbourhood through the lens of urban transformation and gentrification. The research area was bounded by the streets south of Sham Shui Po MTR station as far as the West Kowloon Corridor (fig 4).

Studying these streets, it was possible to observe how people from different classes, social or ethnic groups, or nationalities deal with public space, how they use and transform it, appropriate and occupy it — formally or informally, legally or illegally. This usage of public (street) spaces is what the project defines as the "politics of space" and is considered a good example — according

to our hypothesis — of how effectively public spaces can be used, namely, by a variety of social and ethnic groups at different times during the entire day and night in diverse and often highly creative ways.

What constitutes lively public space was addressed by sociologist Hans Paul Bahrdt in the 1960s when he wrote, "... streets and squares that are used by people of various social classes for different purposes well divided throughout the day and night show precisely what we understand as public life at the lowest, clearest local level, and call the rendezvous of the society with itself."

Over the course of multiple research trips and



workshops, cultural scientist and artist Jürgen Krusche, film-maker Song Yunlong, artist group Baggenstos/Rudolf, and photographer Marc Latzel, together with Siu King Chung and his students from Hong Kong Polytechnic University School of Design, investigated public space in Sham Shui Po.

Together, they mapped the social and urban fabric using photo and video documentation, participatory photo observations, video interviews, artistic interventions, mapping techniques, and talks by experts in their fields. Community organisations such as Society for Community Organization, as well as artists from both Zurich and Hong Kong participated in the process.



The results of this extended research process make up the core of this book. It is complemented by contributions from experts on specific topics. This enabled the book to do justice to the complexity of the topic, and to give readers in-depth perspectives and (visual) information about Sham Shui Po itself.

The Book

Gentrification

Alternative art spaces, artist studios and offices of the so-called “creative class” are often regarded as evidence of the first signs of gentrification. In his essay, Isaac Leung investigates whether or not this also holds true for Sham Shui Po, while also presenting us with these first new art spaces in Sham Shui Po. He argues that the classical model for gentrification is only partially accurate in describing what is happening in Sham Shui Po. Although rent is cheaper than in other parts of the city, artists and galleries can hardly find any affordable spaces for working or exhibiting. The result is that most of the new art spaces in the neighbourhood are no bigger than a living room. One exception is Wontonmeen, a multistorey atelier building near Prince Edward MTR (Mass Transit Railway) Station initiated and run by Patricia Choi. As an artist and businessperson, she has been following the processes of transformation in Sham Shui Po closely, speaking with many people in the neighbourhood about how they perceive the changes taking place. Two of her interviews are included in this publication, providing a valuable insight to the concerns of residents in Sham Shui Po.

Though the traditional way of life in Sham Shui Po is rapidly disappearing, Siu King Chung details the livelihood practices of the craftspeople and how they were able to survive in Sham Shui Po on a very modest spatial and economical means.

Through a series of photographic examples, I illustrate the various ways economic structures

of the neighbourhood are changing. My pairs of photographs were each taken with a time lapse of one and a half years’ separation (in 2014 and 2016) — and based on how the ground floor spaces of buildings are used — convey the slow but gradual changes taking place.

Public Spaces

The contributions in the second chapter revolve explicitly around the topic of how to negotiate public space. This is achieved mostly with photographs taken from the project’s various sub-groups and video interviews.

The method of “thick showing” (a play on the term “thick description” by anthropologist Clifford Geertz) in my contribution can be attributed to the domain of artistic research. Through individual pictures, pairs, and series, these images create meaning primarily through showing. The brief introduction intends only to provide contextualisation to the photographs when they alone are not sufficiently explanatory. The photographic series broadly focuses on three thematic areas that emerged during the research project, namely Claim and Occupy, Permanent Change, and Multifunctionality.

Both permanent and temporary appropriation and occupation of public space is omnipresent in Sham Shui Po, something that is visible in many activities and phenomena in the neighbourhood, as well as in specific objects. These mainly temporary appropriations and occupations reveal a further typical situation: the constant change, visible over a few hours, from day to night, over weeks or months, or even over years. The third important topic is the multifunctionality of these spaces. They serve not just pedestrian traffic and vehicle flow, but also many other functions: shops, workshops, storage rooms, restaurants, even habitat.

Complementing the book’s photography, there are video interviews by Song Yunlong on the accompanying website. In these videos, the lives

and livelihoods on the streets of Sham Shui Po recounted by individual people are the centre of attention.

Together with some of Siu King Chung’s students, data in the research area was collected in order to examine the socio-economic profile of people living in the area between south-west of Sham Shui Po MTR Station and as far as the West Kowloon Corridor. The maps produced by students were developed further in Zurich for adaptation in the publication. The seven maps explain not only the socio-economic differences in specific categories, such as the distribution of new and second-hand electronics shops and stalls, but also emphasise the importance of all kinds of economic activity in this area, from both official and informal stores, restaurants, and markets.

Inside / Outside

Photographer Marc Latzel in his contribution examines the relationship between indoors and outdoors, between private and public, on the streets of Sham Shui Po. His photographs reveal the often seamless transitions that make distinctive categorisation impossible.

The artist duo Baggenstos/Rudolf, like other contributions, present a series of photographs documenting an intervention in public space entitled “This is My Private Garden”, which reflects the mix of private and public in the city. They also explore the topic of light. In a workshop at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, they demonstrated how “public light” can be used for private purposes.

People on the Edge

Anthropologist Akram Mohamed has been working in Sham Shui Po for quite some time, and provides insight into how young Pakistani men make their living on the streets of Sham Shui Po, how ethnic groups interact, and what hierarchies they must deal with. This contribution presents a highly differentiated account of the functioning and structure of the informal

night markets, which make up the day-to-day reality for many Pakistanis in Sham Shui Po. The hierarchies of the streets become clear here too; a hierarchy that must constantly be re-negotiated and re-arranged.

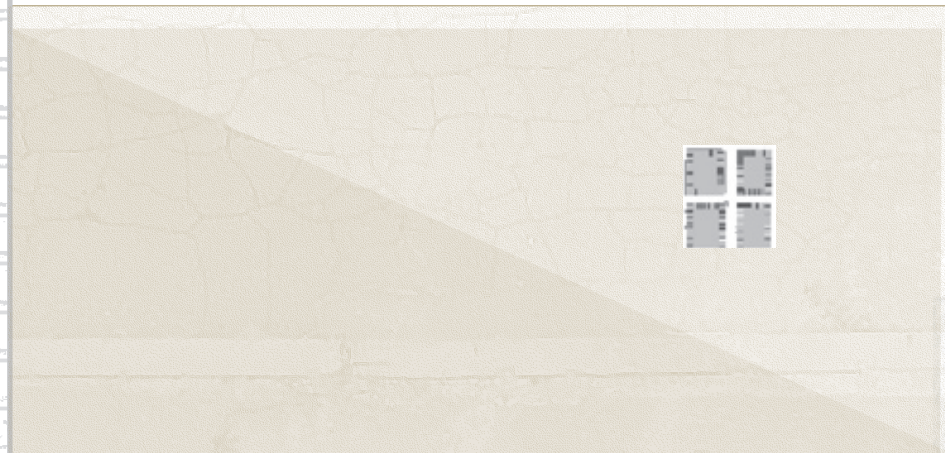
Society for Community Organization (SoCO) takes care of those in society that are in some way excluded, forgotten, or otherwise less visible. Ng Wai Tung and his colleagues are social workers who have worked at SoCO for a number of years and write from several years’ experience working with homeless people in Hong Kong, and particularly in Sham Shui Po. In their account, they explain the often inescapable situations of the so-called “street buddies,” who suffer from the lack of affordable housing and from dated laws that do not address social needs. This article also partly explains what happens in the southward part of the public spaces in Sham Shui Po. ■

Translated from German by
Brandon Farnsworth



1

GENTRIFICATION



21 ◀ 55



ARE ALL CHANGES A SIGN OF GENTRIFICATION?

Jürgen Krusche

In April 2014, all the shops, restaurants and workshops, homeware stores and some market stalls were photographed in four selected streets west of the Prince Edward MTR train station in Sham Shui Po. They were then photographed again a year and a half later in October 2015. The area of focus of this investigation concerned the intersection of Boundary Street and Poplar Street. Photographs were taken every 250 to 300 metres of Boundary, Poplar and Ki Lung Streets, on both sides, and documented as a catalogue. In all, 387 objects were recorded over a total length of almost two kilometres.

The aim of this project was to document and interpret changes occurring within a specific time period; to assess if these were changes due to "normal" development or the result of other dynamics, which brought with it inevitable consequences — many deemed negative — such as rent increases, police repression, and the disappearance of old-fashioned forms of trade. In short: gentrification.

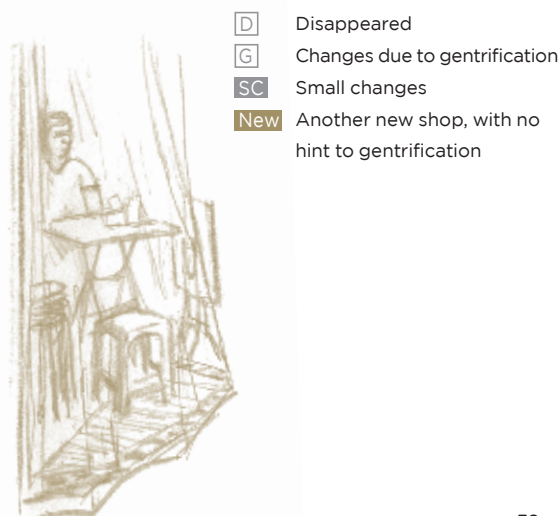
Cities are dynamic places, Hong Kong especially. In Sham Shui Po, the shops, workshops and mobile hawkers which have been in operation for decades, create an atmosphere unique to the district. The documentation of their recent changes intended to illustrate how public life and civic mood might be altered as a result of new shops and restaurants, new residents and new ways of using public spaces.

As evidenced in Patricia Choi's interviews with Sham Shui Po locals (page 28-29), these changes — including those that have introduced new and young people to the area — are also regarded positively. The old is leaving, the new is coming. This constant transformation is also part of Hong Kong's development, alongside the decades-long existence of traditional tofu makers, butchers or small metal workshops. Both tendencies have the right to exist in Hong Kong and ultimately shape the cityscape.

Of the 387 photographed situations, 84 (22%) showed evidence of change; 48 (12%) of which can be attributed to gentrification. The newly established shops, restaurants and services are of a more globally oriented style, targeting a new clientele with more disposable income. These include Café Take a Break (page 45), where the style and price of the coffee could be described as being of an 'international' standard, as well as an oyster bar (page 60), a juice shop (page 43), a sneaker shop (page 42) and new real estate agencies (page 53). In addition to these recently opened businesses, site vacancies are also an indication of a growing dynamism. In 2014 there were 21 sites empty or available for lease. Furthermore, within the 18 month research period, 29 of the older shops and traditional workshops such as "Lee's Metal Works" (page 47) and other clothing or domestic-goods retailers (page 42, 43, 48-49, 51, 52-53) had already disappeared.

As a result, the following could be argued: the 'classical' balance of change and continuity has shifted. The changes progress at a faster rate and in a new direction. They are more oriented towards new global patterns and a wealthier, younger clientele and are less oriented towards the preservation or gentle transformation of locally grown infrastructures. There were 84 'changes' that have had a clear, visually perceptible influence on public space. Especially the 48 transformations which are directly attributed to gentrification are beginning to have a significant impact on the district's atmosphere.

Although many of the old things will continue to exist, the signs are clear. The area west of Prince Edward MTR Station has been of increased interest to investors, and this will reinforce the dynamics of development that continue to change the public life and atmosphere of this district. The following examples are intended to convey the direction these changes are already happening. The investigation does not claim to be representative, but is an attempt to make statements about the process of gentrification, by means of visual data — photographed visible phenomena. ■



APLIU STREET



2014 D



2015 G

BOUNDARY STREET

2014 



2015 



2014 



2015 



2014



2015 



2014 [D]



2014 [D]



2015 [G]



2015 [G]



2014 [D]



2014



2015 [G]



2015 New

