Hong Kong individually wrapped: gentrification of old grass-root neighbourhoods and the future urbanscape of Hong Kong

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Hong Kong Individually Wrapped –
Gentrification of Old Grass-root Neighbourhoods and the Future Urbanscape of Hong Kong

The tallest building or the highest point of the city is always the most popular spot for tourists as it gives a bird’s eye view of the city. Such a 360-degree panoramic view allows us to see everything in the city that we cannot see when we are down in the city, navigating through the labyrinth of its streets. Being high above always gives us the grand pleasure of having everything under our feet without being caught in it. Yet “it’s hard to be down when you are up”, says Michel de Certeau in his famous essay *Walking in the City*, looking down like a god at Manhattan from the 110th floor of the World Trade Centre. The one who has the big picture may not know the everyday life of those who actually live in the city day in and day out. Under the one-country two-system arrangement, Hong Kong’s capitalist system and its way of life have been guaranteed to remain unchanged for a period of 50 years. Until the year 2047, things in Hong Kong are supposed to remain more or less the same. How will the cityscape of Hong Kong look like in 2047? It is most unlikely that this aspect of Hong Kong will remain exactly the same as it is today. But how different it will be? Let us follow in the footsteps of Michel de Certeau and soar to the highest point of Hong Kong, to see what Hong Kong would look like from high above in 2047.

There would be pockets of spectacular, even monumental architectures and luxurious housing apartments here and there, all wrapped in fancy architectural designs. These fancy buildings are there not so much to boost the spirit of the dilapidated neighbourhoods where they are located as to seal the occupants off from their less than desirable surroundings. The immense Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre is likely to be stretching further out from the Wanchai waterfront, separated from the old Wanchai district by the wide Gloucester Road where pedestrians are not supposed to stroll on as they are obliged to use cumbersome footbridges to cross the road. The monumental Langham Place where shoppers shop, eat, drink and be merry is still towering over the modest Reclamation Street market stalls and Portland Street where the small construction material businesses make their living, if they are
not yet wiped out by urban redevelopment projects. The West Kowloon Cultural Complex, with its colossal Norman Forster canopy sheltering its well off residents, tourists and its imported cultural performances and aristocratic art exhibitions\(^1\) is many worlds away from its Yaumatei neighbourhood where people from all walks of life continue to lead the kind of life untouched and unfazed by all the museums and theatres that are theoretically within walking distance. The redeveloped Kai Tak Airport with all its fancy facilities and cruise terminal right next to its humble neighbours in Kowloon City, is not far away from the Kowloon Walled City Park where visitors cannot even catch a glimpse of the Walled City that once boasted of the highest population density in the colony. Lei Yue Mun too would be lined with fancy seafood restaurants and expensive chic cafes along its waterfront, where luxury apartments and deserted factory buildings just a few blocks away can both be seen across a narrow stretch of water. There would be guided tours to the Tin Hau temple and the lighthouse there. The success story of Hong Kong, the miraculous transformation of a cluster of ordinary fishing villages into a modern metropolis within a period as short as a little over a hundred years would be recounted by the tour guides. People would be visiting the Lei Yue Mun village instead of living there.

All in all, we would see pockets after pockets of majestic looking buildings individually and meticulously wrapped away from their dilapidated surroundings throughout the high-density areas of Hong Kong. From somewhere high up above, such specks of fanciful dots amid areas of grey are to be appreciated and even welcomed. From somewhere high up above, all that glitters is what catches one’s attention, the rest are indistinguishable from the general background and hence invisible.

The above depiction of the cityscape of Hong Kong in 2047 is not something out of sheer imagination. If we go to the highest point of Hong Kong today, we can see that such elements are already there in the city. The difference in 2047 is simply a matter of degree. In addition to landmarks like the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre in Wanchai, the Hong Kong Cultural Centre in Tsimshatsui, and phallus-looking skyscrapers like the IFC and the Bank of China towers in Central, there are pockets of luxury housing apartments in the midst of run down old neighbourhoods. 8 Waterloo Road in Yaumatei, 8 Clear Water Bay in Ngau Chi Wan, Hollywood Terrace (荷李活華庭) and Queen’s Terrace (帝后華庭) in

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\(^1\) This paper was written in January 2006, when the HKSAR Government had not decided to abandon the Norman Foster dome and have the entire project reconceived.
Central/ Sheungwan, Pacifica (宇晴軒), Liberte (昇悅居) and Banyan Garden (泓景臺) in Cheungshawan, Majestic Park (帝后豪園) and Sky Tower (傲雲峰) in Tokwawan, to name a few. Characterized by fancy decorations, grand main entrances with palace-like iron gates of black and gold, hotel-like grand foyers with brightly lit chandeliers, high security, private facilities like swimming pools, clubs, gyms, tennis courts, playgrounds, gardens, and very often, high fortress-like outer-walls, these luxury apartments stand out from the surrounding neighbourhoods still populated by people from the grass-root. These majestic-looking housing apartments look as if they were beautifully wrapped gift parcels accidentally left by someone in a poor neighbourhood. Such abrupt, incongruous juxtaposition of the luxurious amidst the humble may seem puzzling to the common eyes, wondering not only why any architects would design such fancy apartments totally out of tune with the surroundings, but also why anyone would pay premium prices to live in such undistinguished neighbourhoods. Yet by virtue of its repetitive occurrence in quite many undistinguished neighbourhoods in Hong Kong, such phenomenon is not an anomaly. There seems to be some crooked rationale underlying the phenomenon.

This paper attempts to explore the rationale underlying the phenomenon of the gentrification of old grass-root neighbourhoods from a spatial perspective. It will examine the interventions of the Hong Kong SAR Government and the real estate developers in terms of the production of urban space of Hong Kong, the ideologies behind such interventions, the impact on the cityscape as well as the discrepancy between the Government’s hopeful project of the future cityscape and that moulded by the everyday life of the citizens and fondly recalled in their collective memory.

**Spatial Interventions and Urban Redevelopment**

Hong Kong always takes pride in its free market economy, the core of neoliberalization favourable to capital investment. As Neil Brenner and Nik Theodore point out, neoliberalization is path-dependent. It requires a certain policy and regulatory landscape and market-restructuring projects that are conducive to its entry and survival. Urban development and consequently the cityscape, is very much dependent on government policies and regulations.

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Hong Kong has been following a high land price policy. All land supplies are controlled by the Government, and lands are sold through public auctions to the highest bidder. The sale of land is in effect only a lease of the land for a period up to 99 years and land sale has always been a major source of income for the Government since the inception of Hong Kong as a British colony. Thus the Government is in effect the true landlord of Hong Kong. The Application List System in place since January 2004 gives further guarantee to the high land price. Under the Application List System, a site will not be sold if the highest bidder at the auction does not meet the expected, or at the very least exceed the Open Market Value assessed by the Government.

As land supply is in the hands of the Government with tight price control, acquisition of old properties for redevelopment is an alternative for private developers to further their business opportunities. The acquisition targets of the developers are usually old buildings that cover a sizeable plot but owned by a relatively small number of owners, since the fewer the number of property owners, the easier is the negotiation of the deal. This is an attractive alternative for developers as the land leases of such old buildings are less restrictive. Other than the building of shopping malls, there is little restriction on the number of stories stipulated in the land lease and no obligation to provide public facilities. Thus more units and floor area can be built from the same plot of land.

Land is the most costly component of a property development. The construction cost difference between standard and luxury apartment is insignificant while the difference in market price is substantial. With fancy decorations and additional facilities such as private clubs, swimming pools, and gardens, the developers can build luxury apartments with an insignificant increase in the construction costs and sell them at much higher prices. The sale of luxury apartment in old grass-root neighbourhood takes advantage of the buying power and desire for upward mobility of the more affluent within the neighbourhood who prefer to stay in a neighbourhood that they are accustomed to. Moreover, the old neighbourhoods are blessed with well-established infrastructure such as transportation network and close proximity to the city centre.

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3 See A Century of Hong Kong Real Estate Development, 馮邦彥, 《香港地產業百年》三聯書店 (香港), 2001年七月.
The Land (Compulsory Sale for Redevelopment) Ordinance facilitates private urban redevelopment initiatives by stipulating the compulsory auction of the remaining shares of a lot ownership when a developer has acquired a 90% share of the lot. An amendment of the ordinance is currently being proposed, under which compulsory auction of the remaining share of the lot is increased from 10% to 20%, thus further facilitates the urban redevelopment initiatives by the private sector.

The sustenance of capital accumulation is dependent on an ever expansion of consumption. As David Harvey points out, residential areas (neighbourhoods, communities) provide distinctive milieus for social interactions from which individuals to a considerable degree derive their values, expectations, consumption habits, market capacities, and states of consciousness. A stable neighbourhood does not tend to stimulate consumption. Thus from time to time, a mature neighbourhood must be disrupted by the capitalists to create new consumption habits to sustain the accumulation of capital. The gentrification of the old grass-root neighbourhood is in effect a residential differentiation process to disrupt the neighbourhood so as to create opportunity for the upward mobility of the more affluent in the neighbourhood, thereby stimulating their consumption habit. In a mature neighbourhood, the differences among the residents are buried under their similar values, expectations, consumption pattern and access to public resources such as schools and recreational facilities. The disruption of the existing seemingly homogenized community makes disparity between the affluent and the average visible, and the community more conscious of their differences. There is a built-in exclusion from the neighbourhood by virtue of the design of the luxury building e.g. grand foyer with high security, private gardens, private swimming pools, private club etc. Dwellers of the luxury apartments not only enjoy their private facilities but are also secluded from the rest of the community. Social interactions between the residents of the luxury apartments and their grass-root neighbours outside their apartment buildings are minimized. As the number of units in the new buildings is always maximized, residents from other parts of the city are also accommodated, thereby disrupting the original community relations. Concerns of these affluent new residents from outside the neighbourhood may not be the same as that of their grass-root neighbours. For example, the affluent residents may have high concern for cleanliness, traffic jam and security, while the small businesses in the neighbourhood may welcome the business opportunities brought about by the high traffic.

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4 All ordinances cited in this paper are available from the Bilingual Law Information System of the Department of Justice at http://www.legislation.gov.hk/index.htm
5 The Urban Experience, Chapter 4 “Class Structure and Residential Differentiation”.
will take considerable time to work out the differences and settle the disputes between the old and the new residents to regain the solidarity that the community used to have.

Urban redevelopment and improvement of living environment are never the objectives or concerns of the private developers. The developers’ main concern is making profit as this is key to the prosperity of their business, urban redevelopment or improvement of living environment are just means to make profit. Thus, the sustainability of urban redevelopment by the private sector is low. As the number of old buildings lucrative for private redevelopment gradually decreases and the more affluent market sector who can afford new homes is gradually depleted; or the housing market enters into a trough, the developers will stop pursuing this alternative as the profit of the redevelopment projects is no longer desirable. Thus urban regeneration cannot rely on the initiatives of private developers. We can foresee that old massive multi-stories buildings with hundreds of units like many of those in the Yaumatei areas will be left out in the cold if the Government does not take the initiative for their renewal. According to the Housing, Planning and Land Bureau, there are about 9,300 private buildings in the Metro Area (i.e. Hong Kong Island, Kowloon, Tsuen Wan and Kwai Tsing) which are 30 years' old and above. In ten years' time, the number of buildings over 30 years' old will increase by 50%. It would be a horrendous task for the Government to carry out such massive urban renewal by itself. Initiatives like the Building Safety Loan Scheme, Coordinated Maintenance of Building Scheme and mandatory building inspection are being introduced to help ease the problem without actually solving them. To ease the urge for urban redevelopment, the newly revised Landlord and Tenant (Consolidation) Ordinance lifts the upper limit on rent control to give incentive to the landlords to comply with the proposed mandatory building inspection. While such policy gives incentive for landlords to better maintain their property for higher rent and somewhat ease the pressure for redevelopment, it has negative impact on the low-income tenants who cannot afford the rent hike. They will have to move to either remote areas or even more depilated places where the rent is affordable.

In light of the dilapidation of buildings in the urban areas, better organized urban renewal of old neighbourhoods is necessary. To achieve this mission, the Government had set up the Land Development Corporation in 1987, a statutory body independent of the Government under the Land Development Corporation Ordinance. With a view to improve the efficiency in urban renewal, the inefficiently operated Land Development Corporation
was later replaced by the Urban Renewal Authority (URA) in 2000 under the Urban Renewal Authority Ordinance. The URA focuses on the redevelopment of degenerated buildings in urban areas that are not lucrative or feasible for redevelopment by private developers. Under the Urban Renewal Authority Ordinance, once a redevelopment project is approved by the Secretary for Housing, Planning and Lands, the URA has the right to acquire the shares from the property owners concerned according to its own acquisition policy and compensation scheme. That is to say, property owners and tenants of old buildings must give way to the redevelopment projects of the URA. So long as the project is in accordance with the Town Planning Ordinance, the URA has the supreme power in the planning and design of the renewal projects, not to be restricted by the original land lease.

Since the URA is operating on a principle of commercial viability, commercial consideration is of high priority in all urban renewal projects undertaken by the URA. A simple survey of the URA projects 6 will find that the density i.e. the number of units, of the completed or proposed projects is much higher than the original, and the commercial value of the site is also increased by building more retail space and by upgrading the housing apartments. Old buildings usually have retail space only on the street front, while the redeveloped projects usually have several stories of indoor retail space. Very often, the URA joins force with real estate developers in its redevelopment projects and many of them become luxury housing for speculative investments e.g. 8 Waterloo Road in Yaumatei and the Merton (泓都) in Kennedy Town, or totally commercial oriented real estate projects e.g. Langham Place, the shopping centre / hotel / office complex in Mongkok, where it is not likely that the original occupants will be able to afford to live or continue their businesses in the redeveloped projects. It is obvious that the agenda of the URA is anything other than enhancing and strengthening the socio-economic and environmental fabric for the benefit of the urban communities as it claims. At least, the urban communities here do not seem to refer to the original occupants.

One thing worth noticing is that there seems to be fewer contentious issues involving acquisition of properties by private developers than by the URA. As private developers are profit oriented and they do not have to follow a rigid non-discriminating principle, they are more flexible with the demands of the property owners. Very often they accept alternatives like the exchange of a new unit for an old unit at a price difference, or they will help the

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6 See URA website at http://ura.org.hk/html/c800000e1e.html
residents and small businesses to resettle in the same neighbourhood; and unlike the URA, they are more flexible with the compensation. So long as there is lucrative profit to be made and they can complete the deal, the developers are willing to do whatever within their means to accommodate the residents’ needs. Yet the tenants are always the victims as there is little obligation for the property owners or the developer to help them with the resettlement.

On the other hand, the acquisition compensation scheme and redevelopment concept of URA are often criticized for their inflexibility and inadequacy. Despite a provision under the URA Ordinance for public objection to the proposed redevelopment projects, public objections are usually in vain. A good example is the recent Wanchai Lee Tung Street redevelopment project, where the URA does not even consider the alternative renewal proposal put forward by the residents. The proposal benefited from inputs given for free by a group of professionals who felt there must be better ways to renewal than simply razing everything to the ground and building anew. There have also been cases of fierce resistance by property owners, for example in 2002, property owners involved in the Shamshuipo Fuk Wong Street/ Fuk Wa Street project had to be physically removed. Although the objective of the URA is to provide better living conditions and to revitalize the neighbourhood, a concept often welcome by the residents; very often the renewal projects destroy the livelihood and the social network of the residents. Same community resettlement of the residents or negotiation for unit for unit exchange are never considered by the URA; the compensation is rigid irrespective of the differences among the different units of the building, even though such differences are reflected in the price when buying properties in the open market. Small businesses whose survival is dependent on the social fabric of the neighbourhood and low running costs are forced to close as they will not be able to survive in an unfamiliar neighbourhood. The greeting card printers on Lee Tung Street and the Chinese herbal shop in Shamshuipo are typical examples. Residents with little financial means are often forced to move to a remote and unfamiliar neighbourhood for cheaper rent. This could be devastating especially for the aged who may not easily adapt to a new environment.

To a certain extent, the public rental housing development complements the urban redevelopment projects as many of the original residents of the demolished old buildings in the urban areas may not be able to afford to resettle in the same neighbourhood. With the high land price policy and high structural unemployment, people in the low-income brackets will have to rely on public housing to meet their housing needs. About 1/3 of the population
is now living in rental public housing with 35% of them in Tsuen Wan / Kwai Tsing and New Territories North. The future development of public rental housing will focus on northern New Territories in areas like Tuen Mun and Tin Shui Wai far away from the urban centre, where there is ample supply of land at relatively cheaper costs. For example, the Government is planning to build 15,000 public housing units in Tuen Mun. Tenants affected by the URA projects who are qualified to apply for public rental housing will most likely be moved to the public housing estates away from the city centre. The remote rural space is being re-conceived for public rental housing. As the old buildings are demolished, the low-income and underprivileged class is gradually being squeezed out of the city centre. They have to migrate further and further away from the urban centre which is being taken over by the more affluent residents and consumers.

In a society like Hong Kong, where profit always comes first, preservation of old buildings and even heritage sites is of low priority. Very often heritage buildings or streets of unique character have to give way to property development. Even government projects are of no exception. Despite protests and petitions from the public, streets with distinctive local flavours like the greeting card street and the birds street still have to give way. Those that are preserved are only left as decorations only. The clock tower next to the Cultural Centre in Tsimshatsui is the best-known example. The old Woo Cheong Pawn Shop and the 18 Ship Street in Wanchai are the latest additions to the list. As pointed out by Ackbar Abbas, architecture in Hong Kong encourages a process of unreflective visual consumption. Two examples serve to illustrate graphically the point made by Ackbar Abbas. The transplanted Murray Building in Stanley has been turned into a restaurant complex. Meticulously reassembled and hence resurrected in its present site, the building has been completely taken out of its original context. There is no hint of its historical meaning. It’s simply for unreflective visual and monetary consumption. On the other hand, the Government refused to renew the license of the 80-year old Man Yuen Noodles, one of the few remaining licensed street food stalls. It was thus forced to close. Instead of being an operating food stall serving customers everyday, Man Yuen Noodles becomes a display in the Hong Kong Heritage Museum. In Hong Kong, heritage is to be seen as a spectacle or a display rather than as an integral part of life.

9 Ackbar Abbas Hong Kong, Culture and the Politics of Disappearance, Hong Kong University Press, 1997
Elitism of Hong Kong Government

Despite fierce resistance from residents and protest from heritage protection groups, the URA seems to be adamant on its handling of urban renewal. Hidden behind the Government’s tendency to intervene and its obvious bias towards developers in matters relating to urban redevelopment, is the elitist ideology that urban development is something to be planned and engineered by the elites and professionals of the Government and real estate developers. Input of the residents at stake are not important as they only focus on their own welfare and lack a holistic vision of the future of Hong Kong and what’s best for Hong Kong. The colonial ideology of elitism of the ruling class still prevails.

While it is sensible that urban renewal projects should be for the welfare of the community, yet the Government seems to have a different idea about who the community is. It seems that the original property owners and residents of the redevelopment projects are not included in the community that the Government has in mind. Must the welfare of certain individuals be sacrificed for an urban future projected by the Government and a few big developers? This is something the Government does not care to explain. The prime objective for urban renewal seems to be real estate development, or in broader terms, contribution to the economic growth of Hong Kong. The idea of economic growth has become a myth that is never questioned, taking precedence over the welfare of the people. The improved living environment goes to the new property owners, and the profit from the development projects goes to the pockets of URA and the developers, as well as the speculators. With the demolition of old buildings and the construction of new ones, capital is accumulated at the expense of the original property owners and residents. The capital accumulation contributes to the bottom line of our economic growth without benefiting the original residents much.

For both Hong Kong and its competitors in China i.e. Macau, Guangzhou, Shenzhen and Shanghai, economic growth seems to be the only benchmark of progress imaginable. There is little or no consideration for the actual distribution of wealth among the people, not to mention harmony of society. A more even distribution of wealth would make Hong Kong a more harmonious society, yet it is the economic growth rate that is reported as the achievements of the Government. Consumption contributes the most to Hong Kong’s economic growth and real estate is a consumption item with a high price tag. So long as Hong Kong people are consuming, the Government does not seem to care who are consuming or whether it is consumption or speculation. Real estate development is thus a
quick fix to maintain high economic growth, while the contribution to economic growth by small businesses is insignificant even though the livelihoods of these business owners depend entirely on them. Contribution to economic growth or capital accumulation always takes precedence over the distribution of wealth in society. The Gini Coefficient of Hong Kong, an indicator of the disparity in wealth distribution has been on the rise since 1981 and it is now the highest among developed countries. However, the Government still maintains that so long as the economic growth of Hong Kong is on the rise, there will be improvement to the livelihood of the Hong Kong citizens. As Michel de Certeau says, “it’s hard to be down when you are up”, the Government seems to have lost sight of the lower and underprivileged class in her big picture.

Consumption of Luxury Housing in Grass-root Neighbourhoods

Buying a house is normally for living in it. However, for most people in Hong Kong, a flat is often the most valuable piece of their assets and their most important investment. Lured by the extended boom of the housing market during the greater part of the 1980s and 1990s, it is generally thought that a flat is a good investment with high return and luxury apartments in particular, are often speculatively bought. In a capitalist society where money is not just buying power but power, when houses are expensive, buying a luxury home is often a symbol of status and identity.

A luxury apartment produces not only a comfortable living space, but also social meanings to be identified with. Identity is constructed not only through the price tag of a luxury home as the housing market in Hong Kong is volatile and prices go up and down all the time, it is also through the appearance and design of the apartments. The design of luxury homes in a grass-root neighbourhood has certain interesting characteristics. They are designed to be different from the neighbourhood, not to be blended in. The fancy grand foyers, high security and high outer-walls convey a message of being reclusive and exclusive from the surrounding. They show a distinctive air of wanting to be cut off from their ordinary neighbours and not wanting to be the same. A distinctive identity is constructed through being different.

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10 See Hong Kong Legislative Council Secretariat Fact Sheet FS07/04-05 at http://www.legco.gov.hk/yr04-05/english/sec/library/0405fs07e.pdf
On the other hand, identity is also constructed through similarity. If one wants to be part of a certain social group, one would want to look the same as or similar to those who belong to the group. Yet if we were to go to the established affluent neighbourhoods like Kadoorie Avenue, the Peak, Shouson Hill, Tai Tam, we would find that while the residential buildings there are big and well kept, they are not fancy. Surely there is high security, but there is little fancy decorations or hotel-like grand foyers with lots of chandeliers. The designs of the luxury homes in the grass-root neighbourhoods are only the affluent as imagined, and imagination always exceeds the reality so as to ensure that they are being noticed. Moving into an affluent neighbourhood where one is not familiar with the living environment and the lifestyle of the residents can be daunting, or is it realistically achievable. Projecting a status higher than one’s humble neighbours is an easy way to ascend the social ladder; at least it is so in one’s imagination.

If identity is constructed through one’s imagination, real estate developers are definitely masters of identity construction. It is interesting to see that real estate developers of Hong Kong seldom indicate the actual location of the housing estates advertised in their advertisements, unless the estate is located at premium sites like the Peak. Yet high sounding addresses such as 8 Clear Water Bay Road or 8 Waterloo Road, are prominently featured in their advertisements even though the former address is across the street from the Ngau Chi Wan market in the midst of public rental housing, and the latter is right next to the wholesale fruit market in Yaumatei. It is also interesting to see that facts of the property such as the floor plan are seldom mentioned in the advertisement. Yet on the other hand, these advertisements deploy fancy imaginative descriptions like five-star CEO living, aristocratic style living, or images of European palaces and castles, grand balls and polo playing, which have little to do with the reality of the property. People know very well that these are all gimmicks of the developers and may even find them ludicrous, yet those gimmicks do appeal to the consumers who have the aspiration to move up the social ladder. The buyers are not only buying a property, they are also buying a dream.

Gentrification of Grass-root Neighbourhoods and Its Impact on the Cityscape

In a capitalist society like Hong Kong, it is unlikely that there is even distribution of wealth. There are bound to be people who are privileged and those who are less privileged and the disadvantaged are sometimes even trampled upon by others. Yet for the majority of the people, despite the uneven distribution of wealth, it is less apparent when they all live in
the same neighbourhood where they have similar living conditions and the same social interactions, and share similar values, expectations and consumption habits. The collective consciousness is more community oriented than social class oriented. As Marx argues that a class will become an observable aggregate of individuals only when the aggregate buries all the differences within it and becomes conscious of its class identity ¹¹, when part of the ordinary neighbourhood is gentrified, the disparity between the more affluent and the average becomes visible. Social class will become more distinctly stratified; community-consciousness will be disrupted by class-consciousness, undermining the community spirit.

Spatial intervention does not only alter the architecture and facilities of Hong Kong, it also has a temporal impact on the community as drastic alteration of the cityscape displaces the collective memory of the community. As architectures, especially those that are seen everyday in passing are objects of tactile appropriation ¹², they are part of the everyday life of the people who live in the neighbourhood. Parts of the urban collective memory will be gone with the demolition of these architectures. Langham Place will never remind its shoppers of the birds street where the shopping complex is currently standing on. It is like some sections of the collective memory are being wiped out leaving it blank. Collective memory is not like history textbooks that need to be memorized. It is collected over time and recollected as our memory flashes. With the rapid urban demolition and redevelopment, the face of Hong Kong looks different from day to day, and the difference is often drastic. People are becoming disoriented and widening gaps in the collective memory would result in a collective amnesia, making people more and more alienated from the environment where they grew up and were once familiar with. New buildings are always designed after the latest trend and not in harmony with its surroundings. Luxury apartments all have grand hotel-like foyers, high securities and fortress like outer-walls. Shopping malls all have open space in the middle for performances to attract the crowd, with floors and floors of retail shops and restaurants circling around the open space. Chain stores with thousands of choices of similar merchandises and restaurants with similar menus catering similar customers. Similar cinemas showing similar movies no matter where we go. We become lost and disoriented in the city, places simply do not matter anymore, and they are merely addresses.

Wanton spatial intervention also destroys the social and business fabric nurtured organically by the community over time. The clustering effect of small business like the

¹¹ David Harvey, *The Urban Experience* Chapter 4 *Class Structures and Residential Differentiation*.
¹² Walter Benjamin, *The Art of Work in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*.
greeting card printers of Wanchai and the bird market of Mongkok was formed organically over time but was destroyed by government intervention in one stroke. Mutual support among the businesses and affection for the neighbourhood are also destroyed together with the buildings. When the network of personal relationship built over time is intact, the more fortunate ones are likely to offer help and care to their less fortunate neighbours. As the social network is now being broken up, the provision of support to those in need has to be picked up by the Government. Each time when extreme hot or cold weather comes, the Social Welfare Department has to open shelters or to give out blankets and hot meals to those who are not taken care of by their families and friends. Such phenomena were seldom seen before the economy of Hong Kong took off in the 80’s. It was not because such support was not needed before, nor is the Government more caring for its citizens now; it is because neighbours are more supportive to each other when the social network of the community is intact. The regrouping of residents as a result of urban redevelopment brings strangers together, and it takes time to rebuild the social network.

As people can no longer afford the increase in the costs of living as a result of the gentrification of the neighbourhood, they are forced to migrate to the outskirt of the city, and the affluent is concentrated in the urban centre where everything is at their fingertips, a process of social exclusion is also taking place. The lack of job opportunities in the city outskirt coupled with the high transportation costs to work in the city centre, make life even more difficult for the lower strata of society. The opportunities for exploitation will increase as the number of disadvantaged increases and concentrate in the outskirt of the city, and the Government leaves issues like minimum wage and maximum number of working hours in the hands of the market. When it is an employers’ job market, the employers dictate the terms. When even the Government follows a policy of awarding service contracts to the lowest bidder, workers who work for subcontractors of government services are subject to exploitation, what can we expect from the private businesses?

The birth rate of Hong Kong has been on the decline. The birth rate in mid 2005 has gone down to 0.9% which is far below the 2.1% required to maintain balance of the overall population. As the major source of immigrants is from Mainland China, most of these new immigrants fall into the lower income bracket. They also tend to concentrate in the run down neighbourhoods in the city or the public rental housing in the outskirt of the city. We will

witness the disparity between the affluent and the poor becoming more and more intensified socially as well as geographically.

**An Imagined Cityscape**

With a perspective from high above, the kind of cityscape projected by the Government is different from that experienced by citizens who live in the day-to-day hustle and bustle of the city. From high above, only things that stand out are visible. Elements belonging to the day-to-day practices of everyday life are invisible. Spectacles become symbols of prosperity and progress. While social harmony is not visible, majestic-looking buildings and monumental architectures get all the attention. From the urban renewal projects initiated by the URA and the other Government projects, the path of urban development conceived by the Government gradually unfolds. Each URA redevelopment project strives to create a new spectacle that stand out from the surrounding rather than a structure that is in harmony with the neighbourhood. The Argyle Street / Shanghai Street (birds street) project in Mongkok has become an awesome shopping mall, hotel and office tower complex. 8 Waterloo Road, the lot beside the ordinary-looking wholesale fruit market has become a luxury apartment building. Yu Lok Lane/Centre Street project in Sai Ying Pun involves the building of a historic theme garden and residential blocks. Even the small-scale Fuk Tsun Street / Pine Street redevelopment project in humble Taikoktsui will be turned into a green “oasis” among its run down neighbours. The Government does not seem to want to become harmonized with the “ordinary”. A survey of the design of the redevelopment of the projects on the URA website all show similar designs i.e. high rises with several floors of retail areas, rooftop gardens. Such features seem to the minimum standard of design that makes up an imagined ideal cityscape projected by the authority.

We will be able to see the broad outline of the future cityscape of Hong Kong by putting together the development initiatives of the Government e.g. Disneyland; development of the new phase of the Ocean Park; the West Kowloon Cultural District of luxury apartment buildings, cultural performance shopping complex with the designer sky dome by Norman Foster; the 3 options i.e. residential complex, sports complex or commercial / tourist complex put forward for redevelopment of the old Kai Tak airport all of which have a cruise terminal; the URA’s newly announced mega development scheme of historic theme garden and a residential development at Yu Lok Lane/Centre Street, Sai Ying Pun; the redevelopment of the heritage former Marine Police Headquarters at Tsimshatsui Canton Road / Salisbury Road.
into a heritage hotel, shopping and restaurant complex; the proposed Cha Kwo Ling/Yau Tong/Lee Yue Mun mega project transforming the area into a residential tourist mix with luxury housing, man-made island and cruise terminal and so on. It is obvious that the Government is working at scattering an array of spectacles across Hong Kong.

Hong Kong is on its way to become a city of fabricated spectacles: Symphony of Stars, frequent fireworks, Avenue of Stars, theme parks etc just like Las Vegas where all the fun is fabricated and heritage is a decoration. Spectacles as such have little cultural identity, similar ones can be found and can be made all over the world. There will be more and more “transients” in the city i.e. the visitors, and the people who serve the visitors. More people will be making a living out of Hong Kong without actually living in Hong Kong as their sense of belonging is gradually undermined by the visitor-oriented new cityscape, where spectacles are built for the visitors but not for the dwellers.

With the gentrification of the old urban areas where the grass-root used to live, more and more people in the lower income class and the underprivileged will be driven away from the city centre to the outer skirt where there are little job opportunities and the transportation cost to the city centre is high. Otherwise, they have to congregate in those degenerated buildings which have been deemed by both real estate developers and the URA to be unsuitable for redevelopment and become the inner city poor. Probably the only chance for the underprivileged to enter the world of all those individually wrapped spectacles is to serve as cleaners and washers of the eateries there. We will see luxury apartment buildings standing in the midst of dilapidated neighbourhoods, like playing tug-of-war with their poor neighbours, waiting to see who the eventual winner is. Will the poor neighbourhood be eventually gentrified in its entirety or will the gentrified be depilated some day and be submerged into the immensity of their poor neighbours?

The superficial pretext – the exotic and the picturesque – appeals only to the outsider. To depict a city as a native would calls for other, deeper motives – the motives of the person who journeys into the past, rather than to foreign parts.

– Walter Benjamin *The Return of the Flaneur*

Probably the insight of Walter Benjamin could shed some light on the HKSAR Government on their urban redevelopment initiatives. Does the Government want Hong Kong to become a spectacle for the tourists, or the home of her citizens? This is the question that the Government should seriously contemplate.
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