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Man Wah Debra WONG

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The Commoditized House and Home: A Short Study of Hong Kong Housing

Debra Wong Man-wah

I. Introduction

A home is a place of anchor both physically and psychologically for us as individuals. It is a designation – home is something which we call home. It has a profound influence on our identity and sense of well-being. It is linked to the notion of dwelling – which according to Susan Saegert is the “physical, social, and psychological transactions by which a person maintains his or her own life, joins that life with others, creates new lives and social categories, and gives meaning to the process, thus gaining a sense of identity and place in the world.”¹ Home is however a more elusive concept. It is relative in the sense that the word can be used to designate not the place of dwelling but a place where we are rooted, a place we identify as our origin, our base, a place where we rest and find refuge from the outside world. It has deep psychological significance; we invest in our homes the value of affect through the passing of time during which emotional ties are established, habits formed and identity shaped.

¹ Susan Saegert, “The Role of Housing in the Experience of Dwelling”, *Home Environments*, ed. I. Altman and C. M. Werner, New York: Plenum Press, 1985, p. 288.

The house is the physical embodiment of home, the structure in which we house our worldly possessions, the space which we occupy and are able to control, modify, and which we use to express ourselves and allow our personality to spill out to the surrounding environment.

The content that the notion of “home” carries and the socially accepted housing norms and standards of course differ widely across culture. In the modern or “westernized” world, most people live in homes situated in either a single- or multi-storey house which is detached or semi-detached, with or without garden, or in apartments which form part of a building. In each house or apartment there would at least be a kitchen and a toilet with bath or shower facilities. Such constitutes the minimum “modern standard” of respectable housing and allows one to carry out all biological functions within the confines of one’s own home. Apart from such minimum standards, housing across the modern world varies, as are people’s preferences and notion of what a house or apartment should be like. These reflect deep-seated differences in culture and identity, including familial relationship and power relations within a family, gender stereotypes, perceptions of and relationship with nature or the outside world, ideas about personal space and privacy, attitudes towards life and habits such as eating, sleeping etc.

The house and the self

According to Kimberly Dovey, home is “a highly complex system of ordered relations with place, an order that orients us in space, in time, and in society. Yet the phenomenon of home... means to be identified with the place in which we dwell... home as identity is primarily affective and emotional, reflecting the adage *home is where the heart is*. Identity implies a certain bonding or merging of person and place such that the place takes its identity from the dweller and the dweller takes his or her identity from the place.”²

We appropriate our home environment and turn them into *our* own place, by establishing our practices within it, by drawing boundaries and transforming it, beautifying it with objects and furnishings, and by looking after it.³ As people express themselves through the control and ordering of the physical environment, conflicts or clashes over how the home environment should be managed sometimes spill over into clashes in personality – which is hardly surprising since the differences in environmental values are in fact “clues in the material world about something partially hidden in the individual psyche”⁴.

² Kimberly Dovey, “Home and Homelessness”, *Home Environments*, ed. I. Altman and C. M. Werner, New York: Plenum Press, 1985, p. 40.

³ *Ibid*, p. 47-51.

⁴ Clare Cooper Marcus, *House as a Mirror of Self: Exploring the Deeper Meaning of Home*, Berkeley,

The concept of self is also inextricably wound up with personal possessions⁵. Home is where we store our personal possession, and the way we store them often reflect deep-seated values towards not only the object itself but attitudes towards the events, memories or people with which the object is connected. For “dwelling is the most intimate of relationships with the environment”⁶. We develop into what we are today through living our life as shaped by the environment we live in and through interacting with a place we call our own.

To some people, the house or home may be a symbol of status and the choice of where to live would reflect the owner or homemaker’s perception of his place within the society or community.

The sociocultural aspect of housing

The home environment is a sociocultural artifact⁷. The concept of *habitus* in the housing context refers to the way domestic space is appropriated by the resident i.e. a system of predispositions or customs that are generated by past residential experience⁸. For example, the occupation of rooms signifies patterns of territorial

California: Conari Press, 1997, p. 153.

⁵ Marcus, p. 71.

⁶ Susan Saegert, “The Role of Housing in the Experience of Dwelling”, *Home Environments*, ed. I. Altman and C. M. Werner, New York: Plenum Press, 1985, p. 288.

⁷ Roderick J. Lawrence, “A More Humane History of Homes”, *Home Environments*, ed. I. Altman and C. M. Werner, New York: Plenum Press, 1985, p. 117.

⁸ *Ibid*, 117.

practice and privacy concerns. The relative size of the shared living area e.g. the living room and dining room compared to the bedrooms reflect attitudes to daily living and family bonds. The built environment in turn would engender daily practices and family values in the long run.

Home as a commodity

However, in addition to it being a place of anchor or a site of attachment or affect, the *home* is increasingly commoditized. It is the image of home that is bought and sold in the marketplace.⁹ Buying a house or apartment today is another form of investment which could yield substantial profit in a relatively short space of time. In a market like Hong Kong's, flats can be bought and sold within a day and are highly liquid assets. While the market distinguishes those who buy for investment and those who buy as users, the boundary is easily crossed as an owner who inhabits his own home can decide to sell his home for a number of reasons and turn to the rental market.

In this paper we will look at the phenomenon of commoditization of housing, or the "home", in the private sector in Hong Kong. In a market-driven capitalistic society such as Hong Kong, the "successful" formulas have been replicated numerous times,

⁹ Dovey, p. 54.

resulting in developments and “homes” which are strikingly similar and devoid of individuality. While in the modern world few people nowadays build or design their own home, and thus to a certain degree most of us are alienated from our “home” for a start, the housing units available in Hong Kong are among the most standardized, and commoditized, ones in the world.

II. Housing in the Hong Kong Context

Housing trends in Hong Kong

Hong Kong has experienced a continuous population growth since the Japanese occupation era. The rapid expansion of population makes the provision of housing a daunting task. In the private sector, the tenement house, or *tong lau*, provided the bulk of the housing required since the 1960s as housing demand soared. Located in crowded urban areas, rows of tenement houses adjacent to one another would line up along the streets, one leaning against another. The design of the *tong lau* was aimed at maximizing space available in order to house the maximum number of people. Decorations were minimal. They are quick and cheap to build, which provided a quick solution for the boom in population.

On the other hand the provision of public housing by British Government helped

to improve the living conditions of those who do not have enough means to buy their home in the private sector. It is one of the most successful public housing projects in the world and to this date public housing provides not only a place for living for a significant part of the population in Hong Kong but also the much needed sense of security.

In recent years there has been a lack of literature on the study of private sector housing in Hong Kong. While we know that in 2003 and 2004, a total of 26397 and 26036 private domestic units were completed respectively¹⁰ with the majority of the units being small to medium-sized flats of 40.0 – 69.9 square metre or 431 to 752 square feet (the numbers being 17908 in 2003 and 18225 in 2004 respectively, forming 68% and 70% of the total number), it seems there is no statistical figure in respect of the proportion of 2-bedroom or 3-bedroom flats, although with some knowledge on the housing in Hong Kong we could safely infer that they would largely consist of 2-bedroom apartments, with a small part of them being 1-bedroom or 3-bedroom apartments.

In Hong Kong, apartments and houses are sold by price per square feet which also serves as an indicator of the “value” of a certain property or general indicator of

¹⁰ See Hong Kong Housing Homepage, http://www.cityu.edu.hk/hkhousing/hs/others/PDU_Area_FL_Area97-04.htm

the property prices in a given area. The reduction of property prices into a unit price makes prices easily comparable. However, the situation is complicated by the common use of the gross floor area (建築面積) instead of the saleable area (實用面積) or internal floor area. The rise and fall of property prices is also easily comparable by referring to the price per square feet. Value in the same housing development differs by reason of factors like view, prospect and height etc. It is the price which a hypothetical purchaser is willing to pay. The valuation by banks or financial institutions are taken as the standard “value” of a flat and this would be compared against the price offered in the determination of whether a flat is a good “bargain”. These devices ensure that every property regardless of locations or any unique characteristics is reducible to a figure which could be compared with those of other properties in the market.

This pricing strategy tells us nothing about the psychological or emotional aspect of “home”. However much we invest in our home in the process of singularization or appropriation, in the end it is still a commodity in the market, and amount of affect or emotions we invest in it has no effect on its value or likely price to be achieved at all. This has to do with the fact that flats are built in large numbers and there are always similar alternatives in the market. Further, owners are prevented by the deed of mutual covenant from modifying the exterior and thus any

modifications to the flat can only be in the interior, which can be torn down during renovation.

The bulk of the new developments in Hong Kong in the last decade consist of large-scale development of multi-storey towers. With the limitation in space and the high population density in Hong Kong, the trend in private sector residential projects has been to “go up”. Big construction projects providing a large number of units also has the added advantage of reducing the average construction costs for each unit. Nowadays it is not uncommon to see large-scale residential projects consisting of buildings of over 50 storey, which was practically unheard of before 2000. Examples include The Victoria Towers (港景峰) (3 towers of nominally 70 storey, providing approximately 1000 units), Sorrento (擎天半島) (5 towers of nominally 67 to 81 storey, providing 2126 units), The Arch (凱旋門) (nominally 79 storey, 1054 units), Le Prestige (領都) (10 towers of nominally 70 storey, approximately 4000 units).

Commoditization and Sameness

It is not difficult to discover that these so-called “luxury apartments” that have sprung up in the last decade or so look incredibly similar. In the face of the visual “sameness”, in an attempt to distinguish these developments with one another and to endow a sense of individuality and prestige on them, the developers have come

up with grand and “innovative” names, usually taken from a European context. Names in French are common (e.g. Les Prestige, La Splendeur); names of places in Europe or America are often appropriated to lend the development the sense of prestige associated with the place (e.g. Manhattan Hill 曼克頓山, The Arch etc.)

The sale of new developments invariably adopts the same marketing strategy – to offer the idea of the genteel lifestyle which is attached to the ownership of a flat in that development. Underlying the marketing campaigns is the notion of home as identity. A “genteel” home qualifies one as belonging to the “genteel” class. The advertisements target at the affluent working class who has the means to buy but not the time to devote himself/herself to the upkeep of the home, and yet want to aspire to become one of the “upper class” – an identity which can now be gained conveniently through the purchase of a home in a desired location.

However, the making of “home” does not end in buying but also in the subsequent affective investments into the home as a lived space – the personalization, improvement and modifications done subsequent to purchase or acquisition – especially when everyone begins with an identical flat in the first place. On the other hand, the other form of tenure – renting, further curbs one’s ability to personalize his/her living environment. Since the abolishing of the security of tenure

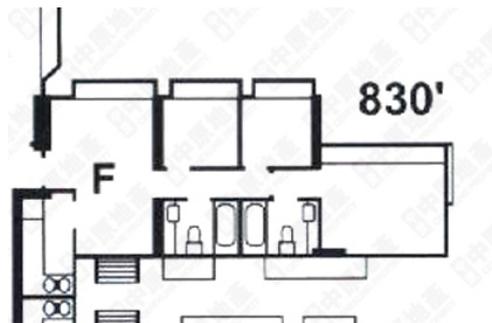
in Hong Kong in 2004, tenants no longer have the benefit of the security from eviction they previously enjoyed (under the law, the landlord can only terminate the lease in certain circumstances, such as when they required the flat for self-occupation) and the lease is subject to termination at will by both the landlord and the tenant after one year. In addition, short leases often contain terms which limit the tenant's right to modify the interior of the house or apartment which severely restricts their ability to personalize their living environment, and the possibility of emotional ties and attachment to their home.

Reading the Flat – a Spatial Analysis

From the eighties onwards Hong Kong saw a boom in residential developments of the “new” style. They largely follow a “standard” plan. Flats are organized in blocks with the lift lobby occupying the central position, and flats radiating outwards to maximize the façade area or exposure to the surroundings and to allow more windows to let in sunlight. Commonly there are 8 units on each floor with the main doors of each flat largely equidistant from the lift lobby. The main doors would open into the parlour composing of the living area and the dining area (commonly called the living room (客廳) and the dining room (飯廳) although strictly speaking they form only one room. Then a corridor leads to the bathroom and bedrooms which are

more private spaces by reason of their location – they are shielded from the outside world by the living area which the visitors must first pass through. For units with three bedrooms, the sizes of the bedrooms would differ with the biggest bedroom styled the master bedroom. It is common for master bedrooms to be equipped with an en-suite bathroom which is a value-enhancing feature.

The most common-used design for a 3-bedroom flat (with en-suite bedroom) looks like this:¹¹



This layout is common among flats ranging from approximately 700 square feet to 1000 square feet. For flats with gross floor area of more than 1000 square feet there are usually additional features such as an additional bedroom or servant's quarters. Balconies are optional but value-enhancing features. Most flats nowadays have bay windows which could take up as much as 10% of the total internal area of the flat.

¹¹ This is the plan of a flat in Parkland Villas, Tuen Mun (Courtesy of Centadata).

The 3-bedroom flat is designed for the small family or three or 4 persons. Ideally, the couple or parents would occupy the master bedroom which has the benefit of the en-suite bathroom and the child or children would occupy the other bedroom(s). If there is only one child of the family then one smaller room could be used as a study or as a room for the domestic helper.

The most “visible” portion of the flat consists of the living room and the dining room. This is the area where guests would sit and family members gather during meal time. The larger the living and dining area, the more “face” the owner would have and therefore the living and dining area usually given precedence in space allocation, sometimes at the expense of the bedrooms. For a 3-bedroom flat of approximately 700 square feet to 900 square feet, the living area would take up at least one third of the total area. It is usually rectangular in shape with the corridor running across in the middle. Such a layout is designed to fit in a sofa, a TV on one side and a dining table on another, but little of anything else. Even if there is enough space leftover after those “necessities”, such space cannot be easily utilized. The personal experience of the author is that one would have a hard time even finding space for an upright piano, not to say bookshelves or other “non-standard” furniture.

As for the bedrooms, the master bedroom would be allocated more space to

reflect the status of the married couple as head of the household. The other bedrooms would be smaller in size, very often big enough only for a single bed and a wardrobe. Even if some are bigger, they rarely allow more than a single bed, a small writing desk and a small wardrobe. Anything more than that would have to be custom-built. In fact it is quite usual for families to have custom-built furniture for children which consists of an elevated bed, with a wardrobe and a desk beneath it as a space-saving device. Such allocation of space dictates that sleeping, changing and studying are considered to be “private” activities carried out in the privacy of one’s room. Entertainment consists of watching TV which would take place in the living room, the “communal area”, as space is reserved for a TV set and sofa in the living room but not anywhere else. If the bedroom is too small even for a desk, the child would have to study in the living area which puts him under the constant surveillance of the parents. This is an example of how the layout of the flat would affect practices of those living in it – in this case the delineation of the public/private divide within a family and its activities.¹²

The typical kitchen would be best described as “compact” and “functional”.

¹² I speak from my personal experience as well. I grew up in a middle-class family and spent my teenage years with my parents and younger sister in a 3-bedroom flat similar to the one shown above. My desk was located in my own room and I was used to working in my room behind closed doors. Even now I still prefer to work in the privacy of my own room free from outside disturbances, but my husband, who spent his teenage life in a small and crowded Housing Authority flat and was used to studying in the library, prefers to write his MCS assignments in the library.

Almost all new developments now have built-in kitchen appliances including at least a stove, a washing machine, and extractor fans. The kitchen space is a highly-regulated space with everything already put in place when the flat is conveyed to the purchaser. The kitchen is made to appear clean, pristine and immaculate. This is a typical modern kitchen which is considered “too small” but is so for a reason – to reduce the amount of walking done during food preparation¹³, with the ultimate aim being to increase efficiency. Moreover, this type of kitchen is designed to be easy to clean and to look after, which would suit the lifestyle of single dwellers or working couples.

In a society with such long working hours and little leisure like Hong Kong, it is desirable to “outsource” daily household tasks such as cooking and doing the laundry. People eat out more often and laundry shops become attractive alternatives. In the typical flat like the one we have seen above, no space is given to the “unsightly” activities such as drying laundry. Those who have lived in “new-style” developments would know that the act of hanging clothes and linen etc outside the window is considered unsightly by those who manage the development. The residents have to dry their clothes indoors – but with no space allocated to such a purpose – or take them to the laundry shops. Thus the home has been deprived of one of its functions,

¹³ Witold Rybczynski, *Home: A Short History of an Idea*, London: Heinemann, 1998, p. 223.

with the residents becoming increasingly reliant on the provision of services by commercial entities.

Since home is the *locale* which houses the life experience of its dwellers and where everyday activities are carried out, the structure of the flat invariably determines or heavily influences the behaviour (territorial and otherwise) of and the relationship between its inhabitants.

One who has got used to the Hong Kong lifestyle might ask –are there any other alternatives? One can easily find examples of households which prefer to put the TV in the master bedroom out of easy reach of the children. However, what should one put in the living room if not a TV? There might be some who chooses the 3-bedroom flat for its size has no need of the third bedroom. However, the structure of the flat may not allow the demolishing of a bedroom – not if the wall in question is a load-bearing wall. The problem is those who prefer an “alternative” way of life has no alternatives in the market – most, if not all, of the flats in large developments (except the up-market ones) now built have their space arranged in similar ways.

If the home only allows the basic biological functions (i.e. sleeping, changing, eating) with the exception of TV being the only form of leisure that was envisaged and provided for in the design of the walls that contain the “home”, what about the

residents' life outside home and work? The clubhouse, to which every resident has right of access and "co-owned" (in the legal sense of the term) by the homeowner, provides for leisure immediately outside home and forms an extended part of home. A typical clubhouse would include a gym, a swimming pool, lounge area with sofa and children's playroom etc. Some larger clubhouses even have dining facilities. Clubhouses are extensions of the home, making the home environment more self-sufficient – residents can now stay indoors while satisfying all their basic needs. With the television and the internet as a window to the outside world, they are well-provided for in their homes, a place which allow them to recuperate after a busy day at work. Thus leisure has been another aspect of daily life which has been "outsourced" by means of the invention of a half-private, half-public community space – the clubhouse.

III. Conclusion

Through this example we see how self-serving capitalism is at work – the rules of capitalism provides for the initiative to attain maximum gain; the monopoly of the property developers and the practice of the Government of selling land by large-sized lots, which hinders smaller developers from entering the market; the hefty land

prices which means that space is costly and precious, and barely affordable for the working class; the work pattern and long working hours of Hong Kong people – all contributes to the present system and attitudes towards home and living. The advertisements which idealize living in the genteel style construct a delusion of taste alluring many into the constructed fantasy.

The increasing commoditization of the house (or flat), in the words of Kimberly Dovey:

“...engenders a confusion between house and home because it is the image of home that is bought and sold in the marketplace. The belief on the part of both producers and consumers that the home is the house trivializes the concept of home and treats it as an object to be instantly consumed... Commoditization has its main eroding effect not in the quality of house form but in the quality of the relationship of the dweller with the dwelling...”¹⁴

Gerald O’Hara in *Gone with the Wind* tells his daughter Scarlet: “Why, land is the only thing in the world worth workin' for, worth fightin' for, worth dyin' for, because it's the only thing that lasts.” It is hard to imagine such attitude among those

¹⁴ Dovey, p. 54.

living in the “modern” Hong Kong. For them, land (or, to be precise, undivided shares in a piece of land) is probably just another form of property that can be converted to money just as everything else, with the additional advantage of shelter. Living in a highly commoditized and homogenous housing environment, our lives are becoming increasingly structured by the highly controlled, regulated and confined home environment, with the result that we have now become deprived and impoverished in our daily personal life, and estranged and alienated from our home and self.