

A Critical Study of the Public Space in Hong Kong

Lo Ka Man Claire

The blatant increase of malls and the continuous decrease of public space in the city are both undeniable facts. Some people accuse the private property developers of privatizing the public space and some argue that Hong Kong Chinese do not have the tradition of spending time in public space at all. This essay aims at revealing the needs of public space by Hongkongers and how public space in the territory is eaten up by both private property developers and the government. These will then be followed by some suggestions on how the co-existence and the balanced development of the private and public space can be made possible in Hong Kong.

Definition of Public Space

Before analyzing the topic, it is necessary to give a clear definition of public space.

The term “public space”, when translated in Cantonese, is always mixed up with the concept of “public place”. The latter includes “all piers, thoroughfares, streets, roads, lanes, alleys, courts, squares, archways, waterways, passages, paths, ways and places to which the public have access either continuously or periodically, whether the same

are the property of the Government or of private persons”.¹

Yet, “public space” is much more than just a place of public access. In addition to the meaning of a public place, there are two more criteria for public space, including being accessible by all and being able to be used by all. People from all walks of life, regardless of their social and economic conditions, have the right to access a public space.² No admission fees or tickets are needed when one wants to enter a public space. People make use of a public space as a site not only for circulation but also a site of social and cultural implications. One can freely exchange his/her values or thoughts with any other in the public space.³ For example, one can dance openly in a public space before a crowd and the audience can express their likes and dislikes towards this performance.

Do Hongkongers need Public Space?

Do Hongkongers need public space? Some scholars suggest that we Hongkongers, under the influence of traditional Chinese culture, lack the interest in public space.

This is because gathering in the public was forbidden in the ancient time for the sake

¹ The Bilingual Laws Information System : “Summary Offences Ordinance” (Chapter 228) Section 2. Version date: 02/01/2007. (website : <http://www.legislation.gov.hk/chi/home.htm> , Date of visit : 8-12-2011)

² Ray Hutchison ed. : *Constructions of urban space*. (Stamford, Connecticut : JAI Press,2000), pp. 6-18.

³ Li, Lin : “Indoor city and Quasi-public Space: A study of the shopping mall systems in Hong Kong.” *China Perspective*. Vol.39 (2002): 51.

of the country's well-being.⁴ Moreover, the hasty lifestyle and the limited lands in Hong Kong both prevent Hongkongers from developing the habit of spending time in public space. All the evidence seems to suggest that public space is not something indispensable to Hongkongers. Is this really true?

Tracing back the history of Hong Kong, public space is in fact vital to Hongkongers. Before British colonization, Hong Kong people had already made use of public space as a site of social interactions. The traditional markets (hui), ancestral shrines and the open areas in villages were all important interacting places for villagers day-to-day. After 1842, the functions of public space gradually grew as local Chinese were not allowed to gather in other public space like the Statue Square in the Victoria City.⁵ As time went by, traditional villages and rural public space had given way to the urban development of Hong Kong in the following decades. Public housing estates and private multi-storey buildings proliferated in the mid-twentieth century to cater for the growing Hong Kong population. Parks in public housing estates, various commercial streets and street markets provided Hongkongers with public space. However, the springing up of shopping malls in the city since the 1980s marked the beginning of the fall of public space. Obviously, it is the process of complete urbanization of Hong Kong that renders us lesser and lesser public spaces.

⁴ Pu Miao ed. : *Public Places in Asia Pacific Cities*. (Dordrecht ; Boston : Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001), pp.185.

⁵ 劉永蜀 : 《簡明香港史》, 香港 : 三聯書店有限公司, 1998, 頁 5-9。

A lot of scholars have addressed the need of a more balanced development between the public and private space in Hong Kong. According to Li, such a balanced development is the key to cultural identities and the urban dynamism of the city.⁶ The surrender of public space to private malls and skyscrapers will inevitably remove the unique style and features of Hong Kong people.⁷ The increasing privatizations of public space in the form of shopping malls and the urban renewal projects by the government have raised public awareness of their public space. In the late nineties, each Hong Kong resident had only 1.5 square meters of public space while each Singaporean had 4.5 square meters.⁸ In some densely-populated areas like Mongkok, each Hongkongers had only 0.5 meter of public space.⁹ How is our public space eaten up by the private property developers and the government?

The growing appetite of the private property developers

Why can the private property developers eat up our public space continuously? Owing to the laissez-faire policies of the colonial government and the domination of the Legislative Council by heads of private property developers, urban planning in Hong

⁶ Li, Lin : “Indoor city and Quasi-public Space: A study of the shopping mall systems in Hong Kong.” *China Perspective*, Vol.39 (2002): 52.

⁷ 陳慧燕：〈後殖民香港在全球化下的城市空間與文化身份〉，文化研究@嶺南，創刊號，2006年9月。（網址：http://www.ln.edu.hk/mcsln/1st_issue/，瀏覽日期：10-12-2011）

⁸ Pu Miao ed. : *Public Places in Asia Pacific Cities*. (Dordrecht ; Boston : Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001), pp.171.

⁹ 「旺角休憩地每人只半米 全港質素最差 有如沙漠兩極」，《蘋果日報》，第 A02 版，2000-03-12。

Kong had largely given way to the interests of various property developers. These private developers were given much control over their holdings. For example they can privatize the public space around their shopping malls.¹⁰ In return, the colonial government received billions by selling lands to and receiving property taxes from private developers. This “tradition” of private developers enjoying supreme power over their development plans and properties persists today. Supported by the SAR government’s will to make Hong Kong a sparkling tourist spot and a world city, private developers build more and more mega malls. In the following paragraphs, analysis of how private shopping malls have swallowed up our public space will be given.

In the past forty years, there was a noticeable grow in the number of shopping malls. In 1966, the completion of the Harbour City in Tsim Sha Tsui acted as a prototype of big shopping malls. With the development of the railway systems (MTR and KCR), more and more shopping malls were being built in the eighties, including the Taikoo Place in Taikoo Shing and the New Town Plaza in Shatin.¹¹ The increase in shopping malls first started in Central, Admiralty and Causeway Bay on Hong Kong Island. The building of skyscrapers and colorful shopping malls together with those glamorous office ladies hustling through these buildings formed what Professor Lung Yingtai

¹⁰ Cuthbert, A.R. and K.G. McKinnell : “Ambiguous space, ambiguous rights - corporate power and social control in Hong Kong”. *Cities* 14:5 (1997) : 295-296.

¹¹ 潘國靈 : 「靈機一觸」, 《經濟日報》, 第 C14 版, 2007-03-19。

called “Central Value”.¹² Around the turn of the twenty- first century, this “Central Value” has spread to Kowloon. Festival Walk, Langham Place, APM and MegaBox etc. are all evidence of the invasion of “Central Value”.

As these shopping malls are usually adjacent to MTR stations, an individual can easily reach them. Apparently, everyone can choose whether to access these shopping malls and do whatever they like there without any obstacles. Is that really the case?

According Li, private shopping malls, the atria inside, the tunnels or bridges leading to these malls and all the passages of the MTR are all quasi-public space. That means they are all areas under private control and the access is somehow restricted and designated.¹³ For example, if you live in Telford Garden and you go home by MTR, you are forced to pass through Telford Plaza in order to return home; likewise, if you want to go to IFC Mall, you can simply get there by MTR without walking outdoors.

As our public space in commercial streets and pavements are rapidly replaced by these quasi-public spaces, we have little power and right to choose where to go except to follow the designated routes by the private developers. Once we enter a quasi-public space, we are under the control and surveillance of the private sectors.

For example, we have to pass through countless shops in order to get to the escalators, we can only eat the food provided by the restaurants inside, we are encouraged to

¹² 龍應台：《龍應台的香港筆記@沙灣徑 25 號》，香港：天地圖書，2006，頁 91-92。

¹³ Li, Lin : “Indoor city and Quasi-public Space: A study of the shopping mall systems in Hong Kong.” *China Perspective*. Vol.39 (2002): 50.

consume and we cannot sit on the floor or shout in the malls etc. All these are the tactics used by the private sectors to safeguard the commercial interests of themselves and their tenants.

Media's role in silencing our desire for public space

It is clear that private property developers have not only replaced our public space with the quasi-public space but have also deprived us of the right to use the designated public space. Yet, why isn't the public aware the fact that their daily life is increasingly controlled by the private property developers? Or, the public is indeed willing to accept the shrinking of public space? Thanks to the help of media, consumption becomes indispensable to Hongkongers. The media in fact plays a crucial role in consumption. According to Silverstone, the media makes consumption our daily habit.¹⁴ We are forced to see millions of advertisements everywhere around the city. Through the advertisements of various commodities we see or listen to on television channels, radio broadcasts and billboards in MTR stations or in the quasi-public space, we develop a strong desire of consumption. These advertisements make us long for consuming something which are not really fundamental and essential to our life, for example, a deluxe dinner or a brand name handbag.

¹⁴ Silverstone, Roger. : *Why study the media?* (London ; Thousand Oaks, Calif. : Sage, 1999), pp. 78-81.

At the same time, the media is also reinforcing the “Central Value”. The promotion of the various shopping malls by the private property developers through the media mediates a message to the public that these air-conditioned shopping malls, as connected to the public transport through the quasi-public space, are all comfortable and convenient to visit. Everyone is longing to be a glamorous office lady or a man in his fine black suit walking through the nicely-decorated shopping malls.

In our age, time is compressed. It is no longer a constraint in consumption.¹⁵ We can access the shopping malls without spending much travelling time, as most of the malls are connected to our public transportation system through the quasi-public space.

The media has completely changed the public’s experience of consumption. We can shop and we need to shop anytime and anywhere. Consumption is now something pleasurable and irresistible to consumers as it is convenient and with no time limit. No wonder why the public has not much discontent while the private property developers are gradually eating up our public space.

A World-class Hong Kong : Government’s attitude towards public space

The government has apparently provided us with sufficient public space in the forms of recreation parks. Does the government really give us enough public space? In the

¹⁵ Silverstone, Roger. : *Why study the media?* (London ; Thousand Oaks, Calif. : Sage, 1999), pp. 83.

following paragraphs, analysis of how the government has eaten up our public space will be given.

As the colonial government knew that Hong Kong was “a borrowed place”, her main focus was to ensure that Hong Kong was a stable place for economic purposes. Little effort was put in by the colonial government on dealing with the well-being of its people. Following the established customs of the British colonial government, the SAR government has not got a well-organized urban planning.¹⁶ Worse still, the SAR government has put further emphasis on making Hong Kong an Asia’s World City in order to develop its tourism industry.¹⁷ Since the launch of the global brand program of positioning Hong Kong as an Asia’s world city, the government has made a series of advertisements showing the world that Hong Kong is a shopper paradise. These advertising campaigns mediate a message to the public that for the sake of Hong Kong’s development, building shopping malls and skyscrapers are of utmost importance.

Therefore, more and more mega shopping malls and skyscrapers are built so as to present to tourists an image of a world-class city. Besides, the government has also

¹⁶ Pu Miao ed. : *Public Places in Asia Pacific Cities*. (Dordrecht ; Boston : Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001), pp.173.

¹⁷ Hong Kong's new brand platform : <http://www.brandhk.gov.hk/brandhk/eindex.htm> , (Date of visit : 10-12-2011)

tried its very best to get rid of all third world spectacle,¹⁸ including old buildings, old commercial streets and outworn parks, which are regarded as conflicting with the stable and high quality image of Hong Kong.

Some people may argue that the government has provided us with sufficient public space. We have a number of sizable recreation parks in Hong Kong, including Kowloon Park, Victoria Park, Hong Kong Park and the Hong Kong Zoological and Botanical Gardens. In addition, we have countless parks inside our public housing estates. Yet, are these recreation parks a real public space?

With a view to managing our parks in an easy and proper manner, a lot of rules are set for the users. For example, bringing animals to the parks, riding bicycle, roller-skating, flying kites, bringing food to eat, running, walking on grass and lying on benches etc. are all prohibited in the parks managed by the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD). Moreover, many of these parks are subject to fixed opening hours. While it is understood that some of the rules are set for the sake of public safety, others like 'do not run in the parks' or 'do not step on the grass' are in fact violating the freedom of the citizens to utilize the public space.

How about our commercial streets and street markets which also provide us with public space for social and cultural implications? For example, Women's Street in

¹⁸ 黃碧虹〈消失的空間與湮沒的歷史「都市革命」下的街道文化〉，文化研究@嶺南，第六期，2007年7月。（網址：http://www.ln.edu.hk/mcsln/6th_issue/index.html，瀏覽日期：10-12-2011）

Mongkok is an important public space for the locals to interact with tourists and the Temple Street Market in Yau Ma Tei is another important public space to demonstrate the unique and flexible living style of the locals.¹⁹ However, these public spaces are packed with old buildings and most of them will be redeveloped by the government according to the mode of shopping malls. For example, the government has relocated the shops in Lee Tung Street (Wedding Card Street) to a shopping mall nearby and it is planning to build a sports shoes mall after demolishing the Sports Shoes Street in Mongkok.²⁰

As we can see, more and more restrictions are placed on recreation parks users and long-established public spaces like commercial streets and street markets are replaced by shopping malls. Obviously, the government is eager to create a high quality and noble Hong Kong at the expense of our public space. This is because the government has to mediate an Asia's world city to the world.

The co-existence of the private and public space: what can we do?

Although private shopping malls have deprived much of our public space, they do bring some advantages. For example, shopping malls do provide us with a convenient place for shopping, eating and entertainment. What we should pay more attention to is

¹⁹ Pu Miao ed. : *Public Places in Asia Pacific Cities*. (Dordrecht ; Boston : Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001), pp. 78-85.

²⁰ Urban Renewal Authority : <http://www.ura.org.hk/> (Date of Visit : 10-12-2011).

the balanced development of the private and public space.

First of all, the public should increase their awareness of the importance of defending our public space. We should be aware of the fact that everything we touched is mediated, transformed and poisoned by the media in this media age. We can hardly distinguish between mediated experience and our own real experience.²¹ Through the media, we are mediated the message that consumption and economic development are of utmost importance. Both the private property developers and the government are urging us to consume more than what we really need. We trust the media as we trust what we see is real. Yet, one must notice that what we see from the media is indeed distorted messages. Do we really need a deluxe dinner? Do we really need a brand name handbag? After falling in the consumption trap posted by the private property developers and the government, we will then concede them the rights to use our valuable public space.

We must be reminded that the balanced development of the private and public space is crucial to Hong Kong's future. Therefore, the public should strive for more public space. It is essential for the public to voice out their doubts and wants concerning public space. Joining actions organized by non-government organizations like Local Action can be a good way to make our appeals known by the government. Yet, it is

²¹ Silverstone, Roger. : *Why study the media?* (London ; Thousand Oaks, Calif. : Sage, 1999),pp.74-77.

also important for the public to behave themselves while enjoying their rights to use their public space.

Second, the government should make better urban planning. It is understood that for the sake of Hong Kong's economic well-being, tourism industry is an important key.

Yet, in the process of making Hong Kong a world-class city, the government seems to have forgotten the livelihood of its citizens. Moreover, the government has also

miscalculated the preferences of the tourists. Instead of wandering aimlessly in

shopping malls, tourists are more eager to experience the unique living style of Hong

Kong people. Only by providing Hongkongers with enough public space can we

develop our unique social and cultural lifestyle. According to Mathias Woo, the best

tourist spot is somewhere government's control is the least, letting public space

develop in its own way.²² The pedestrianisation scheme in Mongkok (Sai Yeung Choi

Street South between Nelson Street and Soy Street) is a successful example of how

Hong Kong citizens make use of their given public space.²³ Democratic forums,

street dramas, Falungong and salesmen promoting their products can all be seen in

this area. This vivid public space has not only become an important social and cultural

basis for Hongkongers but also a famous tourist spot. Therefore, public space is not

²² 胡恩威：《香港風格》，香港：TOM (Cup Magazine) Publishing Limited，2005，頁99。

²³ 蔡雪華、孔令瑜、鄧寶山、堵建偉：〈公共空間與文化公民——旺角行人專用區與地下鐵路〉。
(網址：<http://www.ln.edu.hk/cultural/materials/MCSsymposium2006/Panel05/TooKinwai.pdf>，瀏覽日期：9-12-2011)

only vital to our livelihood but also the tourism of Hong Kong. Apliu Street, Tai Yuen Street (also known as Toy Street) and Fa Yuen Street etc. are all examples of public space which demonstrate the unique lifestyle of Hongkongers. Therefore, the government should protect these spaces instead of replacing them with blocks of shopping malls.

After analyzing how public space is eaten up by both private property developers and the government, one must be able to note that a balanced development between private and public space is very crucial. If we allow more and more private developments like shopping malls and skyscrapers to eat up our public space, our city will lose its dynamics very soon. I, therefore, hope that the government and the related parties can pay close attention to the matter and strive for the betterment of Hong Kong together.

A Note in February 2013 – More Challenges Ahead

In recent years, Hongkongers are not only facing the problem of shrinking public spaces but also the rapid change of cityscape with the presence of Mainlanders.

On the one hand, the private property developers have nearly completed the process of utilizing all the existing land for building shopping malls and skyscrapers. On the

other hand, the Hong Kong Government continues her mission to clear the unwanted third world spectacles in the city in order to make Hong Kong the “Asia’s world city”.

Though receiving much criticism from scholars and citizens, the eighteen district councils are prepared to spend millions of dollars on beautifying their districts with district landmarks like the “goose in Sham Tseng”.²⁴ At the same time, the Urban Renewal Authority is working hard on speeding up the urban renewal projects like the Nga Tsin Wai Village Project and the Kwun Tong Town Centre Project. In the Policy Address 2013 delivered by Chief Executive Leung Chun Ying, the Government plans to develop underground spaces in urban areas.²⁵ All these mean that our city is becoming more and more artificial. The public spaces in which our collective memory is cultivated are being restructured or removed.

The problem of shrinking public spaces is further complicated by the rapid change of cityscape with the influx of Mainland visitors. In order to cater for the shopping interests of the Mainlanders, pharmacies, cosmetics retail chains, jewellery shops and electrical stores are growing in numbers in many areas in Hong Kong. Hongkongers not only lack public spaces but also leisure and entertainment sites designated for them.

²⁴ “HK\$1.2m goose has problem with bill”, South China Morning Post, 01 February, 2013.

²⁵ “2013 Policy Address: Seek Change Maintain Stability Serve the People with Pragmatism”: <http://www.policyaddress.gov.hk/2013/eng/p81.html>, (Date of visit: 1-2-2013)

It is obvious that we are facing more and more problems and conflicts regarding the land use in our city. If the Government continues to turn a blind eye to the problem and if we keep on remaining passive, local people will soon be completely marginalized in our own city.

References

English Books :

- 1, Pu Miao ed. : *Public Places in Asia Pacific Cities* , Dordrecht ; Boston : Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001.
- 2, Ray Hutchison ed. : *Constructions of urban space* , Stamford, Connecticut : JAI Press,2000.
3. Silverstone, Roger. : *Why study the media?*, London ; Thousand Oaks, Calif. : Sage, 1999.

Chinese Books :

- 1, 胡恩威 : 《香港風格》, 香港 : TOM (Cup Magazine) Publishing Limited 。
- 2, 劉永蜀 : 《簡明香港史》, 香港 : 三聯書店有限公司, 1998 。
- 2, 龍應台 : 《龍應台的香港筆記@沙灣徑 25 號》, 香港 : 天地圖書, 2006 。

English Journal Articles :

- 1, Cuthbert, A.R. and K.G. McKinnell : “Ambiguous space, ambiguous rights - corporate power and social control in Hong Kong”. *Cities* 14:5 (1997).
- 2, Li, Lin : “Indoor city and Quasi-public Space: A study of the shopping mall systems in Hong Kong.” *China Perspective*. Vol.39 (2002).

Chinese Journal Articles :

- 1, 陳慧燕 :〈後殖民香港在全球化下的城市空間與文化身份〉,文化研究@嶺南, 創刊號, 2006年9月。
- 2, 黃碧虹〈消失的空間與湮沒的歷史 「都市革命」下的街道文化〉,文化研究@嶺南, 第六期, 2007年7月。
- 3, 蔡雪華、孔令瑜、鄧寶山、堵建偉 : 〈公共空間與文化公民——旺角行人專用區與地下鐵路〉。

News Articals :

- 1, 「旺角休憩地每人只半米 全港質素最差 有如沙漠兩極」,《蘋果日報》,第 A02 版, 2000-03-12。
- 2, 潘國靈 :「靈機一觸」,《經濟日報》,第 C14 版, 2007-03-19。

Websites :

1, Hong Kong's new brand platform : <http://www.brandhk.gov.hk/brandhk/eindex.htm> ,

(Date of visit : 10-12-2011).

2, The Bilingual Laws Information System : “Summary Offences Ordinance”

(Chapter 228) Section 2. Version date: 02/01/2007. (website :

<http://www.legislation.gov.hk/chi/home.htm> , Date of visit : 8-12-2011).

3, Urban Renewal Authority : <http://www.ura.org.hk/> (Date of Visit : 10-12-2011).