

URBAN LANDSCAPE STUDIES
EUPHORIGENIC LANDSCAPES

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LAREG



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THE LANDSCAPE OF HONGKONG

Yi-Fong Kuo

FLOATING CITY

“Many, many years ago, on a fine, clear day, the floating city appeared in the air in full public gaze, hanging like a hydrogen balloon....”¹

Why does one choose XiXi’s “the Floating City” as the introduction of this essay? Is Hong Kong really a non-rooted, rich and alienated city as described in XiXi’s novel or Wong Kar-wai’s *Chungking Express*? “The Floating City” describes a modern international harbour city that was developed by overcoming natural power and merging cultural differences in a short time by the use of institutional, economic, technological and global labour power. Yes, Hong Kong is most recognised as a city instead of a region for that it is isolated from its ground; and it is merely about the urban centre besides the Victoria Harbour and different functional-productive, recreational and dwelling-sites connected by rapid transport modes. In fact, Hong Kong as a region is a mountainous peninsula (Kowloon Peninsula) with 263 islands (the one opposite Kowloon Peninsulas called Hong Kong Island) and is divided from Shenzhen

by Shenzhen River. Since Palaeolithic, there have been people like Hakka settled and lived here. Hong Kong used to be a traditional agricultural region with only 2000 population in 1842; but it grew into an service-based international economic centre with 7 million population and average PPP about \$4,4000 in 2010. It’s 3500 times of its population in about 150 years ago. Hong Kong’s modern development focused on interest-oriented, easy managed and one-step development, mainly based on the power of modern governance and market economy, Lefèbvre’s global and institutional level, to transform land resource to capitals and to working and living spaces for 7 million people. It’s power to transform the regional landscape is very different from the urban areas grew from European medieval towns and Chinese ancient cities while in these urban areas, the power of Morphology, the power of global and institutional level and the power of habitat has hundreds of years to converse and intersect. The Landscape of Hong Kong is created with predominated traces of quantitative plans and orders by industrial logic.

THE LAYER OF MORPHOLOGY AND LAND RESOURCES

Hong Kong, located at the intersection of Global market economy and Chinese

social economy, has naturally the opportunity to become an open market. The morphological beginnings of Hong Kong as an international finance centre are the Victoria Bay and its mountainous terrain. The Victoria Bay—located at the mouth of Pearl River Delta, the most developed area in China after 18 century, and with natural 15-meter's deep water—and the 1180 km coastline from the islands, provides the foundation for Hong Kong to grow up to the top-ranked container throughput among international harbours. In addition, the distribution of its mountains, island, plains and bays is the most important character to decide its urban region's distribution: First, the form of the Kowloon mountains that run from north-east to south-west, has divided Hong Kong into 4 areas: at the south-west is the Victoria Bay and its surroundings; at the north is the Yuen Long alluvial plain; at the north-east is the Sha Tin Hoi (also called Tide Core) and its surroundings; in addition to Port Shelter at the south-east. Second, alluvial fans that located at every river mouths, together with bays suitable for harbours and ports development, found the core of urban development. Furthermore, the distance to the coastline and the landform of mountains forms hierarchical the transition from artificial to natural landscapes.

In the south, due to the mountain forms and the regional climate, the surroundings of Victoria Bay and Port Shelter developed different livings. The surroundings of Victoria Bay (known as Hong Kong and Kowloon District), has more than the natural harbour. Its mountainous landform provides a shelter for consistently settlement against typhoons ravaged the South East Asia every summer. If one took the Central-Mid-Levels Escalator and Walkway System from the central business district at the coast to the top Victoria Peak (known as the Peak), one would experience the Hong Kong miniature while passing by the working/public spaces, semi-private/mix-used high-rise districts and private villas. The skyline, of glitter skyscrapers sitting on the winding coastline with clusters of settlements at different times background by the hidden hills around the Victoria Harbour, not only symbolized the glory of modern and industrialized Hong Kong, but also the economic centre of the market world and the winner of the highest priced rental units. On the contrary, although the Port Shelter area is full of hills and bays; there is no shelter against typhoon. The coastal basalt landscape is preserved and the fishing village, Sai Kung, is the classical scene for countryside shots against urban area in Hong Kong movies.

In the north, there are major differences the alluvial plain and the alluvial fans. The alluvial plains of Yuen Long and Fanling area, is equipped with good soil, great flat area and wide intertidal zone that found the foundation of agricultural settlements. Before Hong Kong's urban development, there were plenty of fish farming, shrimp ponds and rice fields. Moreover, before the idea of "developing with Shenzhen" came, the alluvial plain was the granary of Hong Kong that from the Deep Bay to the Tai Mo Shan scattered mangroves, gei wei (基圍; the water area closed by embankments; also used for fish farming), shrimp ponds, fields, and waitsuen (圍村; walled villages). However, due to the development pressure from Shenzhen, these agricultural landscapes are transforming. Compared to the alluvial plain, the alluvial fan along the ShingMun River by Sha Tin Hoi was also settled by several walled villages of fishermen. However, since the Sha Tin Hoi was one of the biggest bays among Hong Kong; and the construction cost to built channels to connect Kowloon (surroundings of Victoria Bay) and Sha Tin through Lion Rock was affordable; the alluvial fans by Sha Tin Hoi were the first area to be chosen for new towns (mainly with harbours, industrial sites and housing areas) to support continuous growth of the surroundings of Victoria Bay in 70's.

Yet the mountainous terrain also leads Hong Kong the competition of land resources and the difficulties in connecting developed areas. This can be easily discovered through the proportion and distribution between developed lands and urban greens. The various hill-tops of basalt bases were designated as ecological and environmental sensitive areas such as country parks. This fact leads directly that 67% of Hong Kong total land is green and that the developed areas are limited to 20% flat area at the hill foots.

To house as more people as possible in limited land is always the key to modern Hong Kong development. Especially in those harbour and river mouth areas, the high-rise buildings are so densely sited that serious urban heat effects arise. Yet, under the philosophy of "human over nature", and the support of modern technology and local construction materials, these limitations in morphology do not stop the pace of Hong Kong development; in turn, they inspire Hong Konger's creativity to form the basis of 3-D urban area. Such an attempt to control and overpass nature is the global institutional level—the combination of urban governance and market economy.

THE LAYER OF GOVERNANCE AND LANDSCAPE STRUCTURE

The available landscape element of the layer of governance could be traced back to the military commanding stations from Ming and Qing dynasties, which were set up to guard the coastline and to look after the inner land. For instance, the Kowloon walled city was located by the coastline of Kowloon Peninsula and opposite the British colony on Hong Kong Island by Victoria Bay. Nevertheless, when Hong Kong grew into a modern harbour city, these military commanding stations, like their fellow along the Chinese coast, lost their original functions and were converted to thematic heritage parks of modern planning system.

Compared to governance attitude of “securing the coastal land but not developing” at Ming and Qing dynasties (prohibition policy), the British government in Hong Kong was to experiment a colonized “city + countryside” that has never been seen. Its’ regional governance toward shaping modern Hong Kong landscape is mainly by the land use and development control system, including different development and planning applications between the New Territories and the Hong Kong and Kowloon District (the surroundings of Victoria Bay/ Harbour); and systematic

control over natural resources. In addition, its efforts on infrastructures, such as transportation, water and food supply and housing, provide the basic living conditions of rapid life style and of Hong Kong as an urban habitat.

To describe the layer of governance in Hong Kong, one can’t miss these three fundamental linear spaces: The first one is the Boundary Street, which divided the New Territories, and the Hong Kong and Kowloon District. In the south of the Boundary Street, the Hong Kong and Kowloon District is the centre of Hong Kong and a luxury shopping, catering and economic district. Over 150 years’ dialogue between Cantonese tradition, English modern and global economy, there are both modern functional skyscraper districts and historical cultural mix-used districts. The New Territories sitting at the north of the Boundary Street, is not only focusing on countryside development, but also the main destination of those new towns with idealistic “garden city” structure and with the eternal mission to support the economic growth of the Hong Kong and Kowloon District. The New Territories is the area to preserve traditional Chinese countryside in British colony, and also the land reserve zone. The land rights, of original people of the New Territories, are allowed to

be hold in clans or families as in Qing dynasty; so that some specific agricultural landscape tissues are preserved. In the meanwhile, the introduction of New Territories Small House Policy speeds up the death of traditional village houses. Thus, upon the non new-town area in the New Territories lies the landscape the varied from traditional village houses, fields, and three floor small houses. To be simplified, the part at the south of Boundary Street is a highly developed urban city; and the part at the north of Boundary Street is an urban region consisted of new-town clusters with transitional regional landscape between agricultural and industrial societies.

The second linear space is the Frontier Closed Area (FCA). This is the old border of British colony and the new border of Mainland China and its Special Administrative Region. Since the existence of the FCA, the development is very different between Shenzhen River: In Shenzhen there are clusters of high-rise buildings; while in Hong Kong there are rice fields, fish ponds and natural villages. Then again, with recent year's trading trends that the Hong Kong's manufacture industry is moving to the north-east of the Pearl River Delta, the connection between Hong Kong and Shenzhen are getting closer and closer.

The existence of the FCA is now facing the challenge of new towns and new development projects such as the Fairview Garden. In the new coming plan, the FCA will be shrunk from 2800 ha to 400 ha. A new urbanization movement is now in the Yuan Long Plain, and the reflections of the Shenzhen River and the Victoria Harbour are going to overlap someday.

The third line is the coastline in the year of 1887. What shows on the map of 2011 at the location of 1887's coastline are main streets; and where used to be sea are now the territory of high-rise buildings and urban open spaces, no matter they are called business zones, airports or urban parks. Lacking for flat lands for development, Hong Kong government's main means of getting lands was through land reclamation. The lands of the new towns such as Tai Po and Tuen Mun, and the former Kai Tak and the new Chek Lap Kok airports are all from land reclamations. Yet the most dramatic landscape change occurs at the Victoria Harbour, the start point of Hong Kong. Although lots of lands released through reclamation to maintain the economic growth, the price was paid that the narrowest gap of Victoria harbour shrunk from 3000 meters to less than 800 meters. The Victoria Harbour is now the Victoria River.

The other important system of the layer of governance came from the 19 century British tradition of preserving countryside and natural heritage. Up to the year of 2010, there are more than 24 country parks and 7 ocean parks designated as the urban recreation or “BBQ” areas within 1-hour travel zone; in addition to 17 SSCIs with specific ecological values, such as Mai Po natural reserve at the Yuan Long Plain. This is the most important foundation of why Hong Kong’s 68 % total land is still green or countryside under such a demand for developable land. However, although the system could secure these greens, but it can’t secure that Hong-Kongers could get enough time to be familiar with these greens. In fact, most of Hong-Kongers pass by these greens to different blocks though various travel modes. They see these greens but not walk on or touch personally these greens.

THE LAYER OF URBAN HABITAT AND SPEED OF MODERN LIFE

As described in the introduction, Hong Kong grew from a cluster of agricultural settlements of only 2,000 people to an urban region of 7 million in population in about 150 years. For these, to find a good dwelling in Hong Kong is always thorny. Despite of the wealthy people living in the hillside vil-

las, most of Hong-Kongers, both in the Hong Kong and Kowloon District and the new towns in New Territories, live in the united dwellings—at the housing buildings about 16-30 floors—provide by the government and the developers; and work in another high-rise office building. Additionally, in the New Territories that encourages countryside living, from 70’s people lived not in the historical village houses but the 3-floored small houses with less than 65.03 square meters living area. Moreover, by the outskirts of urban areas or traditional settlements sometimes lie the refugee houses made by timber or iron sheets legally.

Due to the high price and rent of housing, many people live in the New Territories and travel everyday to Shenzhen, the Hong Kong and Kowloon District, and even Macau or Zhuhai for work. Convenient and rapid transportation becomes the key to Hong Kong’s daily life. Between the New Territories and the Hong Kong and Kowloon District, there are various transport modes, such as metro, rail and fly-over motorways, running underground, through the mountains and in the air, in order to deliver people and goods to the destinations as soon as possible. Furthermore, sitting in the busiest business centre, the Central-Mid-Levels Escala-

tor and Walkway System is not only fast but also operated rain or shine. As the trailer of Octopus (digital wallet system of Hong Kong) said, Octopus — and the moving boxes — makes life easier.

Meanwhile, similar moving boxes and tunnels bring everyday from China fresh food and water to support the daily life of 7 million people in Hong Kong. Although during the British Colonization, about 17 water reservoirs were created through closing bays or valleys to supply clean water and maintain agriculture in the New Territories. At the moment of integration between Shenzhen and HK, urban water supply comes from the East River, and the water reservoirs are transformed to recreational use gradually; the urban agriculture in the New Territories is almost dead except some transformed to organic farming through green parties and some struggling and fighting against the layer of governance like the Choi Yuen Village. With the backup of the mainland, individual city's food self-sufficiency is no longer valued. In turns of local agricultural landscape, the Hong Kong food culture that values flesh ingredients is now supported by industrial transport network exceeding Hong Kong's territory, shipping containers and retail logistics.

This is the Hong Konger's modern

convenient life created by the layer of governance. Multi-functional high-rise buildings, travel boxes and Octopus could supply almost the basic daily needs of a human's dwelling and working. Yet as criticised by Lefebvre, such spaces are merely homogenous, quantitative produced dwelling machines or boxes that function only specific life experiences; but such spaces are not the habitat that reveal the meaning of being.

THE LAYER OF EVERYDAY LANDSCAPE AND HETEROGENEOUS URBAN LIFE

In fact, there is another layer to make Hong Kong so colourful, to provide opportunities to communication and connection of different culture, and to support and linking the layers of governance and private life in addition to integrate with the morphology and to make one localized. This layer is where Hong Kong's slow life lies and where the lost values are. According to Lèfebvre, taking design/political landscapes off the layer of governance and the layer of homogenous habitat off the map lays the intermediate layer. Than it's also what J.B. Jackson called the existing and the transforming vernacular landscapes that created by the conversation of users and the spaces. In Hong Kong, taking off the layer of governance and the layer of homogenous habitat,

such as the filled tide lands, new-towns, airports and country parks, out of the map, there are different landscape tissues lie in high-density development areas, such as the Hong Kong and Kowloon District, and the low-density development area, such as Yuan Long Plain.

In high-density development areas, the most significant landscape tissues are streets/blocks (街坊, in Chinese means one or more streets or one block or people living in these areas, estates (屋邨, UkTuen; tsuen in Chinese means village) and parks. The streets/blocks are usually formatted for more than 100 years and are mainly located in the Hong Kong and Kowloon District. The streets/blocks usually refer to the area along one street or around several streets. The spatial composition of the streets/blocks has a tendency toward mixture of Cantonese styled shop houses and modern buildings with elevator; and the main streets are parallel to the coastline due to land reclamation and morphology while the connecting steps between street blocks are vertical from coastline to hilltops. The land use of the streets/blocks is usually mix-used; and normally, one cannot distinguish one block from another as the "urban centre. There are unusually public living spaces, such as markets and school,

in the streets/blocks for the inhabitants, no matter where these inhabitants' origins are. Due to historical bidding of these interests groups, neighbourhood blocks present different landscape characters and different attitude toward living.

For instance, the Temple Street area of Kowloon was where the fishermen's gathering around in the past. It is now the place to experience traditional nightlife of Hong Kong. Before land reclamation, the Temple Street connected the Tin Hau Temple (天后宮) and the Banyan (榕樹頭), the traditional social grounds, with the coast. Tin Hau Temple was where to worship the goddess of fishermen; and the Banyan (always forms a small square or plaza) and the streets were the traditional public spaces, where Chinese people communicate, celebrate, exchange, exercise and gathering in the past; and the area around the Banyan were full of shops and houses. These as a whole formed a streets/block, or community. Yet now, the Banyan is a park; and public buildings such as the parking tower divide the Tin Hau Temple and the streets. Only the Temple Street left as the true space for public life 'cause the existence of night market. The night market street is about 15 meter's wide with stall-keepers and Can-

tonese styled shop houses besides; and the sighs flying over one's head. There is usually one-man's corridor left to move around at night. However, everyone here is busy at bargain, eating and hanging out with friends, and nobody really cares about this limited corridor. The natural setting of traditional streets is to let people walk slowly, stay longer and exchange.

Except traditional Cantonese streets/blocks such as the Temple Street Area, there are also some modern or British colonize styled streets/blocks. One of them is the Happy Valley Area. The centre of the Happy Valley is the Happy Valley Racecourse; and it is sitting facing the ocean with the hill backup. The Happy Valley is not only with isolated setting that bring peace to the area; but also with an easy contact to the main commercial area of the Hong Kong island. It is different from the traditional streets/blocks in particular, that while the traditional Cantonese streets/blocks are usually mix-used and with intensive street activities after dark, the Happy Valley Area is quiet at night and mostly for housing except some British-styled main streets. Close to the Racecourse set majority Cantonese styled shop houses and modern buildings with elevator; away on the hills are housing estates and private villas,

which are the flagships of Hong Kong's luxury housing and the ideal model for Chinese hillside development.

Though in Chinese called “tsuen/邨” with the idea of village, the estates are the real estate development units with the idea of bringing forward communities. They are in Hong Kong usually clusters of 16-30 floor buildings with some functional green. Only some projects target to middle to wealthy people, like the Kowloon Garden City or the Fairview Garden, is built into clusters of villas. Both of these two types, with their original garden city idea or radiant city idea from Le Corbusier, their ground and outdoor levels should be the area to provide urban recreation and life, the intermediate layer. Yet in order to save spaces and cost, most of the ground and outdoor levels of public housing estates are with greens to look at and with mushroom like cooked food stalls as public restaurants. In addition, for the private sectors that looking the maxima land profit, their estates are usually with walled community garden and with first and ground floor shops or traffic services. Even more, those shops and supermarkets in different estates are usually with the same names. To work, communicate and be harmonious with surrounding everyday landscapes is the battle between the design

and management concepts between developers, management agencies, architects and landscape architects.

One reason for this situation is that the emphases for convenience and fengshui (風水) in Hong Konger's dwelling culture is much more important than the needs for nature or greenery. The other reason is that the lack of building land resources leads to build to maximum. Nevertheless, there is the development model such as the Mai Po natural reserve and Tin Shui Wai. The wetland and aqua farms become the beautiful landscape to look at and to set up the housing estate. Together they are not only the miniature of urban Hong Kong with the modern life style and its antithetic countryside splendour, but also the classic scene for trading posters. Although the Hong Kong Wetland Park connects the Mai Po natural reserve and Tin Shui Wai; together the skyscrapers' cluster that was built right to the boundary and the six-lane Wetland Park Road make the opposition between traditional aqua farming landscape structure and modern functional landscape structures more obvious. With the fragmented landscape tissues and the spaces that opposite to mix-use tradition, the isolated housing estate become the soil of social problems and the theme of "the Way We Are" by Ann Hui.

The parks and community gardens of estates are another intermediate layer to support and linking the layers of governance and private life. There is little consciousness about parks and community gardens in traditional Chinese society. Take the Temple Street Area for example. In previous time, the living and urban activities happened in the places like on the streets, in the temple plaza and under "The Tree"(usually Banyan in this region). The public greenery like parks and walled community gardens was introduced to the region to ease the overcrowded, dirty and disordered conditions of living spaces in Chinese communities in 19 century. In the rise of parks and walled community gardens, a series of user regulations was announced to maintain its cleanness and tranquillity. Unlike the vivid nature in the streets and on the plaza, these public greeneries are recreational and leisurely; and are the outdoor buffer zone to crowded dwellings. Compared this attitude to what the new immigrants from China are trying to adapted from traditional use of public spaces (streets and plazas) to these public greeneries, the reason behind the social conflicts happened while the user regulations of public spaces in Hong Kong are getting more and more open, is quite clear.

Compared to traditional streets/blocks modern estates and recreational green in the high-density development areas, landscape tissues of the intermediate layer, in the low-density development area and outskirts of the high-density development areas, are of wider period and bigger difference in social and economic functions. For instance, the agricultural landscape tissues as walled villages, rice fields/upland field, and the wetland structured by mangroves, *gei wei*, and shrimp ponds; and the industrial landscape such as undesigned or unplanned container fields.

The walled villages like the streets/blocks in the high-density development areas are traditional settlement in the region; but the walled villages are built early before the British came and with inhabitants of the same clan or of Hakka people. The key elements of the walled village as the intermediate layer are the defence wall, the middle axis as public spaces, the ancestral hall, the fengshui trees, the well and the parallel lanes in front of terraced houses. At present, some walled villages are preserved as living heritages; but most of them lose their characters while most of the village houses were converted into small houses; and some leave only the names and the boundaries through modern development.

In the New Territories, the landscape tissues that are the relics of pastimes and that are still explicit and functional at present are the separation and functional lines of the “fields,” such as irrigation channels, field banks and productive roads; upon these tissues, the function of the field might be transformed, but the separations still exist. There are small-scale peasant landscape tissues that featured by terraced croplands on the hills and rice fields on the plane; on the other side, by the river mouth of Shan Pui River (Yuen Long River) are the landscape tissues of wetlands that are formed by scattered mangroves, *gei wei*, shrimp ponds. These are what the granary of Hong Kong left today. Agriculture and fishery are shrinking in Hong Kong. Except the large and functional agricultural and fishery tissues in the areas of the Frontier Closed Area and the Mai Po natural reserve, the productive spaces for rise and fresh vegetables and fruits have been squeezed into broken and scattered pieces lying on the hillsides or enclosed by motorways.

In fact, though the landscape tissues of “fields” (田) exist, more than 60% of the croplands lost their functions. In particular those croplands along motorways, they have almost all transformed into Container yards, scrap yards and other open storage areas that

fix the Hong Kong's character of international logistics centre. The reason that the landscape tissues of "fields" could be preserved or transformed is because that land status of these crop-lands in planning does not change. They are still agricultural lands. Their functional change from agricultural production to industrial storage is due to the land users/owners adaption to social economical change instead of master plan of governance. In this case, the economic power of the layer of governance overwhelms.

CONCLUSION

The transformation from agricultural to industrial landscape happening in the low-density development area and outskirts of the high-density development areas represent the attitudes toward future resources and environmental sustainability of those in power, the public and interest groups in Hong Kong. The relationships between living style, public greenery, estates and the streets/blocks emerges the gap between local culture and modern development when trying to achieve quantity and functions at once; in other words, how local culture was altered by modern development. Time, clusters of different people, and partial experiment and development give Hong Kong the opportunity to have interaction between

Hong Konger's living style and the spaces derived from the layer of governance; thus rise the cultural landscapes such as the streets/blocks. On the other hand, due to the role as land storage and boundary, and the related regulations of country parks, the development in the New Territories is limited to several concentric-circled new towns. Yet the agricultural landscape and greenery of the New Territories are not treasured and extended. The layer of governance views the New Territories only as functional but not living landscapes. The confrontation and fragmentation phenomena of landscape are clear in the New Territories.

Stepping over the homogenous habitat and international governance, the existence of the streets and the blocks supported the Siyizhuxing (食衣住行; Eating, Clothing, Living and Moving) and Economic Development in the Hong Kong and Kowloon District. The rooting floating city shows one Hong Konger' street life culture. Yet, the countryside dream by the British colony and the layer of governance is breaking down. At the rise of Hong Kong and Shenzhen alliance, the power of the urban agglomeration has been staged in the New Territories; and is going to perform even faster than ever (China's national policy is usually for a period

of five years) with modern urban planning and more centralized governance tools. Although the key issue of next phase plans is “low-carbon and low-density,” one does not know if the real content is to continuing its quantitative and development-orientated new towns and estates that bring forward the new urban habitat aesthetic of combination of ecology, wetlands and housing estates with numerous homogeneous container-like dwellings or not. It might be that the euphoria of Hong Konger towards development orientation could change to the real concern of living quality and environment; and they might reconsider the relationship of time, living quality and urban planning, and bring forward the unique modern walled villages and mix-use agricultural and industrial landscapes through overlapping and connecting landscape tissues. Perhaps the answer lies in five years.

ENDNOTES

¹ From *Marvels of a Floating City and Other Stories*, by Xi Xi (translated by Eva Hung), Renditions Paperbacks, 1997