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Negotiating and Designing Public Space.
Experiences with a new M.Sc. in Urban Design Program in Hong Kong
Negoziazione e progetto dello spazio pubblico.
Esperienze dal nuovo programma di Master in Urban Design in Hong Kong

This contribution reflects on first experiences made with a newly launched Master of Science in Urban Design program at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. As an important part of this program, students have to develop their design proposal in response to feedback of different stakeholders and community members. Thus the program responds to the growing aspiration of Hong Kong's citizens to shape the urban development of their city and a lack of a meaningful participation process in the region. With its high density, protected country parks, efficient public transport and large scale housing program, generally, Hong Kong offers important lessons for contemporary urbanism. However, since the end of the British colonial rule and in face of increasing property prices, pollution and the disappearance of local heritage, intensive debates started about the regions future. Another central point of the recent discussion in Hong Kong – and key theme of the new urban design program - is the demand for the rights and qualities of public space.

The paper presents the set-up of the design studio, which was closely linked to a course on "urban processes". During the semester, students had to organize community forums and street exhibitions in a specific district, invite stakeholders and residents and discuss with them their ideas. Their projects, then, had to respond on the various feedbacks and integrate them in their design and policy proposals. The text reflects on the student projects and the lessons learned in the process. It addresses general questions such as the challenges in communicating with a diverse community (e.g. language barriers and culturally different ideas of public space). It addresses the question of the intended and unintended effects of a participatory design studio in the community, and possible follow-ups. And it reflects on the general role of design and designers in shaping community spaces.

Questo contributo riflette sui primi esiti del recentissimo Master of Science in Urban Design presso la Chinese University of Hong Kong. Agli studenti viene chiesto di sviluppare proposte progettuali in risposta a diversi feedback da parte di stakeholders e rappresentanti della comunità. In questo modo il Master dà risposta alle crescenti aspirazioni dei cittadini di Hong Kong di contribuire allo sviluppo urbano della loro città. Attraverso la sua forte densità, i suoi parchi, un efficiente trasporto pubblico e un programma di housing a larga scala, Hong Kong offre significative lezioni sull'urbanistica contemporanea. Tuttavia, dalla fine del colonialismo britannico, a seguito di un considerevole incremento del valore degli immobili, dell'inquinamento e della progressiva scomparsa del patrimonio locale, si sono intensificati i dibattiti circa il futuro della regione. Allo stesso tempo, uno degli argomenti di discussione più recenti ad Hong Kong - tema chiave del nuovo Master in Urban Design - è la domanda di qualità dello spazio pubblico.

Il contributo presenta la struttura del laboratorio di progettazione, sviluppato in stretta relazione con il corso di "Processi urbani". Gli studenti, nel corso del semestre, devono organizzare forum di discussione con la comunità e mostre di strada in specifici quartieri, invitare i stakeholders e i residenti e discutere delle loro idee. I loro progetti dovranno poi adeguarsi integrandosi con i feedback ricevuti, anche mediante proposte di politica urbana. Il contributo riflette sui progetti degli studenti e sugli avanzamenti di ricerca sviluppati nel corso della loro redazione, affrontando anche questioni più generali, come ad esempio le difficoltà nel dialogare con le comunità locali (barriere linguistiche e posizioni culturali differenti relativamente allo spazio pubblico) e gli effetti della partecipazione, programmata e non programmata, della comunità al progetto, insieme ai possibili sviluppi. Riflette, infine, sul ruolo generale del progetto e dei progettisti nel modellare gli spazi della comunità.

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Fig.1 - Hong Kong's district Sai Ying Pun. (photo H. Tieben)

In September 2012, the School of Architecture of the Chinese University of Hong Kong launched a new Master of Science in Urban Design program. The following paper discusses the program's approach of linking design teaching, public space research, and community interaction. ThWe first studio emphasized the study of spatial qualities in Hong Kong's older districts and current transformations induced by a new subway line and urban renewal projects, while the second studio, ongoing now, investigates Hong Kong's relationship to the Pearl River Delta and the design of New Towns (here: Hung Shui Kiu). The one year program ends with a self-defined thesis project. Thus, students of the program should gain experiences with various urban issues at different scales, from older urban areas to new town development (http://www.arch.cuhk.edu.hk/urbandesign/news.html).

The main idea of the program is to integrate knowledge from different disciplines by closely connecting studios and taught courses. The works presented here resulted from the combination of a design studio with a course on urban processes focusing on community participation. The paper discusses the potentials and limitations of linking design education with community interaction in the particular context of Hong Kong at a time of growing community aspirations and political activism. The role of designers here is to facilitate and guide the process to encourage community participation. Through direct interaction, designers are able to learn more about concerns and aspirations of community members and by using their research and urban design skills to re-envision public space and employ alternative strategies in urban planning.

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The teaching is additionally linked to longer-term research projects, so as to inform the studio work and use the design studios and community interactions as an input for the research in return. In our case, the studio is connected to a two-year research project titled "Measuring Community Benefit in Public Space Transformation in [Hong Kong's] Older Urban Districts: A Case Study of Sheung Wan & Sai Ying Pun" (RGC Ref No. 454911), developed by an interdisciplinary team of scholars. Besides the authors of this essay, there are also Essy Baniassad and Helen Grace, with their backgrounds in architecture, cultural studies, urban planning and design.

The use of public space emerged as a joint research interest among the team members and was chosen for the studio based on its central relevance for the discipline of urban design (Cuthbert, 2011). This choice was also a response to the current demands of Hong Kong citizens for more political participation in decisions concerning their city and environment. The joint aim of our research and studio work is the development of a "community benefit plan", as an alternative approach to urban renewal and top-down planning. Participatory design and the critique of urban renewal were important topics in North America and Europe in the 1960s, before they slowly faded since the mid-1970s (Schuhman, 2012) until their recent comeback. In Hong Kong and mainland China, government-led urban renewal projects have created much controversy and are in need of alternative models. Towards the end of the text we will return to the question of how the current attempt to link urban design, public space research and community interaction differs from the early and most recent approaches in the West and what might be its prospect.

Reclaiming Public Space in Hong Kong

In the new millennium up to the present day, there have been various challenges and opportunities for public space in Hong Kong. In the effort to brand Hong Kong as a "World City", local districts and street markets became the target of urban renewal (Ng & Hills, 2003). Back in 1997, Alexander Cuthbert already criticized how in Hong Kong's expanding financial district public spaces had become increasingly privatized and controlled (Cuthbert, 1997). Since then, this process has been continuing, and now it also occurs in other parts of the territory. It is related there to the large Comprehensive Development Areas built around public transport nodes comprising podia with shopping malls and public transport interfaces, further combined with high residential and office towers often with more than 50 storeys. These developments allow to cross-finance one of the most efficient public transport systems with large-scale, private property developments. However, the weaknesses of this strategy are the creation of mainly internalized, homogeneous and controlled public spaces with weak connections to the surrounding environment. While Cuthbert generally criticized public space in private developments, examples in New York show that after continuous negotiations and the various revisions of related ordinances and guidelines since the original implementation of the Floor Area Bonus system in 1961 (Whyte, 1980), the accessibility and spatial quality of privately owned public space (POPS) could significantly be improved (Kayden, 2000). Today, access and free seating are guaranteed in many of these spaces in New York. Also they have developed over the years into a network of in-and-outdoor public spaces providing – despite their ambivalence – an amenity used by a diverse mix of people (Busquets, 2005). When the Occupy Wall Street movement was searching for a symbolic and appropriate place for their protest, they chose Zuccotti Park (Shiffman, 2012), well informed that due to its legal condition this public space in private development would have a guaranteed 24-hour access, in contrast to many public parks which are often closed overnight.

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As a response to the problems arising from Hong Kong's rather oblique practice of granting plot ratio bonuses for spaces of questionable quality, a new guideline was implemented in 2011 by the HKSAR Development Bureau in order to improve the quality of these spaces. This Public Open Space in Private Development Design and Management Guideline was inspired by the New York lesson. Although it still lacks rigorous standards for the spatial quality of the many passageways and footbridges as well as for the provision of seating, it remains to be seen if it already can create positive effects over the next years. As the example of New York shows such guidelines will have to be checked and re-negotiated over time as the city further evolves.

While Hong Kong's public space in private developments had been the theme of a series of recent studies (including previous studios at CUHK: Tieben, Ho & Mi, 2010), the first studio of the MSc in Urban Design program focused on those open spaces in private developments as well as those that are not yet privatized but are neglected and vulnerable in the ongoing urban transformation processes. In Hong Kong, due to its high density, the traditional spaces of streets, alleys and terraces are the closest places to the everyday life in the urban districts. And they remain the most accessible open spaces also when compared to Hong Kong's country and urban parks (e.g. Victoria Park and Kowloon Park). Even the currently designed public waterfronts will have difficulties to be well connected to the urban areas, due to the large-scale road infrastructures traditionally built along Hong Kong's shores.

In addition, these street spaces, alleys and terraces allow the experience of Hong Kong's particular culture and history, which is strongly related to the vibrant street scenes with their small shops, street markets, tea houses and eateries (Smith, 2006). Due to the topography of Hong Kong, these spaces were developed on a narrow stretch of land and on steep slopes. This created challenges for their accessibility but also encouraged the development of Hong Kong's characteristic 3D public space network, which makes use of various mechanical devices such as escalators and elevators, both within private developments or outside in the street.

The studio focused on Sai Ying Pun, one of Hong Kong's oldest districts. It was development based on a regular grid laid out in the 1850s, similar to the grid of San Francisco's old China Town (Genthe, 1984). We are particularly interested in this district as it is currently under fast transformation in the context of the construction of the new MTR West Island Line (an extension of Hong Kong's metro system) and a new uphill escalator system. The studio's approach of micro-scale observations of public spaces was inspired by Michel de Certeau's interest in the personal appropriations of urban spaces in daily life (de Certeau, 1984), with the aim to create a more sensible and nuanced understanding of public space in Hong Kong, informed by but also going beyond Cuthbert's neo-Marxist discourse of privatization and control.

New Citizen Movements Demanding Rights to the City

Since the millennium, there has been a blossoming of new citizen movements, which included protests against land reclamations, demolition of urban heritage (Star Ferry, Queens Pier and Lee Tung Street), and the plan to implement a new course in "National Education". Underlying the motivation of most of these movements is the frustration over the constant postponement of granting more political rights and in particular universal suffrage to the citizens in Hong Kong. And parallel to the emergence of new Western protest movements in response to the 2008 financial crisis, there also formed an Occupy Movement in Hong Kong, which took place at the public space under Norman Foster's HSBC Building.

There is an overlay of synchronous and asynchronous trends between Hong Kong and Western metropolises. For instance, the Occupy Movement can be seen as a parallel movement which shared a similar goal and strategy (Shiffman, 2012). However, in terms of their goals and concerns, the current protests against urban renewal and the demand for more

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community participation in Hong Kong are also similar to those NorthAmerican and European movements back in the 1960s, at the peak of large-scale, government-led urban renewal projects in those western countries. Similarly, the idea of connecting design with community workshops in today's Hong Kong seems to repeat those earlier initiatives in the West.

As a response to the critique against urban renewal over the first decade of the new millennium, the HKSAR Planning Bureau organized in 2008-10 a comprehensive Urban Renewal Strategy Review as an effort to regain trust in the community. Today, each project of land reclamation, urban renewal, public housing or transport goes through a participatory process. However, the process still has important constraints, which - among other aspects - our new MSc program and research aim to address: 1) The participatory process often begins too late, after the most important decisions have already been made; 2) It often remains limited to certain pre-defined concerns, rather than starting from the development of a joint strategic vision based on community needs and aspirations, 3) for a more inclusive participation process to take place, the society at large needs to be empowered to formulate their views.

There is a key role architecture and urban programs can play by providing more balanced background information and by helping community members to formulate their own visions. Then they can offer a platform for the community to negotiate with government agencies and developers to implement such visions. In this process design skills can become the essential tools to visualize and synthesize ideas and formulate joint visions. Through the particular location of the School of Architecture at CUHK within the Faculty of Social Science it can use additional resources and interdisciplinary expertise.
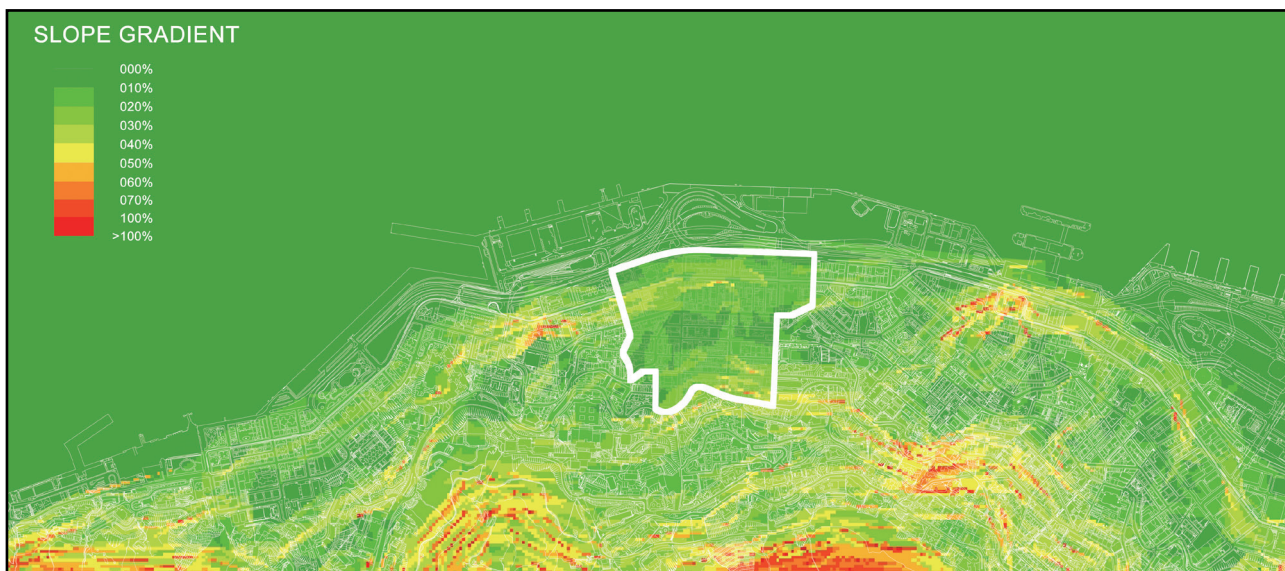

Fig.2 - Topographic survey of the Western Districts including Sai Ying Pun. (Students Tina Wang & Helen Yu, MScUDxCUHK)
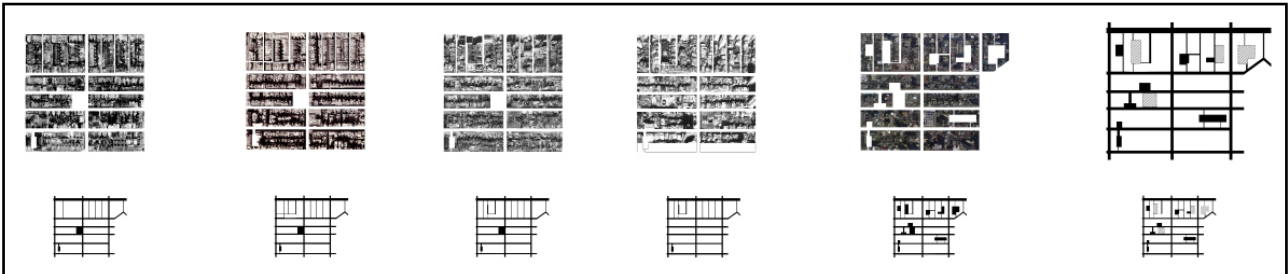
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Fig.3 - Emergence of different public space types in Sai Ying Pun. (Students Tina Wang & Helen Yu, MScUDxCUHK)

Studio Theme

Within the Urban Design Studio, students focused on Sai Ying Pun's public spaces and their transformation in context of the upcoming MTR West Island Line and uphill escalator. The main question given to the students was how the new transport infrastructure could be complemented with the parallel improvement of the district's urban spaces to create more benefits for the community beyond a better movement system. While the quality of Hong Kong's public mass transit system is acknowledged worldwide, the quality of community spaces, such as Sai Ying Pun's Centre Street, is rather appalling. To invest into better public spaces and foster a communal sense is urgent as the local residents feel the pressure of increasing density and property prices. The study theme of the mitigation of inserting a new subway system into an older district was also chosen due to its relevance for many mainland cities, with the Chinese government investing heavily in public transport to cope with the problems of rising traffic congestion and air pollution.

The construction of the MTR West Island Line in Hong Kong is an interesting case. As the line is serving long-established, well-organized communities, the MTR Corporation opted for a new approach minimizing the construction's physical impact on private properties in the area and proactively engaging with different local community groups. One of the consequences of the approach, however, is that construction sites and future station exits are making use of the few existing public spaces, further reducing the minimal amount of open space in the district.

While the parallel research project traces both physical as well as non-physical impacts of the West Island Line construction, students of the MSc program helped by analyzing existing activities and assets related to the public spaces in Sai Ying Pun and develop design and policy tools for their protection or improvement.

Fig.4 - Hong Kong's subway plan of the MTR Corporation, including the extension of the West Island Line along the north-western coast of Hong Kong Island, currently under construction.

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Studio Work

In the studio, eight students from mainland China, Mexico and Canada participated. They came from non-local undergraduate programs in architecture, urban planning and community design. Students worked in pairs over the four-week research phase, focusing on the area around the planned MTR exits and the different open space types in the district (streets, alleys and pocket parks). Based on their research, and the feedback of the community forums and street exhibitions (see below), students were asked to develop group strategies and individual proposals. These proposals should include site-specific interventions as well as design and policy tools which could be potentially applied in similar contexts.
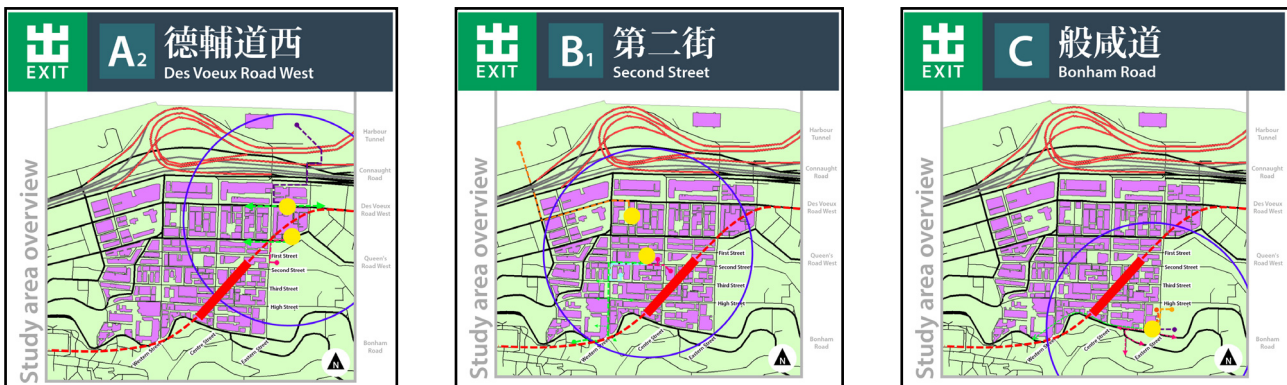

Fig.5 - Location of the planned station exits of the MTR West Island Line in Sai Ying Pun.

Group Research

The group research started with ethnographic studies of activities in the different public spaces. Students had to produce videos in each type of public space as a way to learn about local routines and to develop empathy for the place.

Among the challenges identified by the students were the rise of property prices and rents, the ongoing gentrification, the general neglect of smaller public spaces such as alleys and ladder streets, the separation of government managed pocket parks from the surrounding buildings and activities, the difficult access due to the steep topography, the negative impact of vehicular traffic, as well as a range of road safety measures which despite their good intentions stifle free movements and social activities.

A closer look into the activities in the open spaces also identified relationships between microclimatic conditions (exposure to rain and strong sunlight) and the usage of pocket parks, as well as an interrelation between the lack of activities in certain alley spaces based on their lack of accessibility. For the district's main open space, Centre Street, a change of activities according to the degree of its slope was found. Owing to the short period of the group research, the accuracy of the findings was limited, but they already suggested ideas for the longer-term academic research project and they offered inspirations for initial design ideas.

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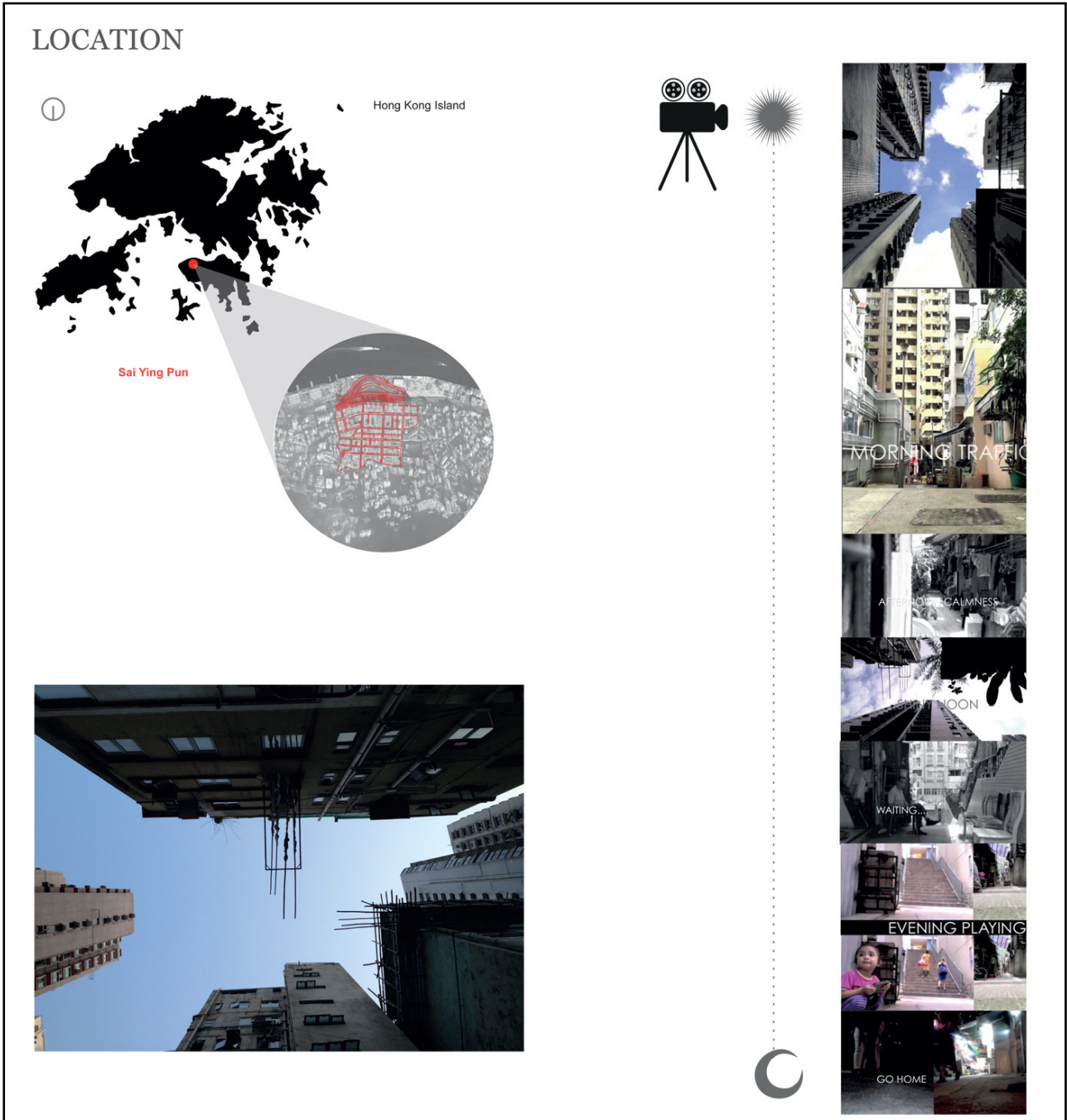
Fig.6 to Fig.8 - Location of Sai Ying Pun and stills of the video exploring the district's alley spaces. (Students Yang Xue & Maribel Cervantes Ochoa, MScUDxCUHK)

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Community Forums and Street Exhibitions

As part of the Urban Processes course interrelated with the Urban Design Studio, two community forums and street exhibitions were held. The community forums took place at the Conservancy Association Centre for Heritage (CACHe), a Hong Kong-based resource center in Sai Ying Pun that organizes exhibitions and tours related to a range of expressions of local culture. Representatives of key stakeholders in the district were invited to give their views in the forum. They included Wilfred Yeung Sze-wai (Chief Architect, MTRC), Lawrence Yau (Urban Renewal Authority), Anny Tang (HKSAR Planning Department), Wong Kin-shing (Central and Western District Council), Katty Law (Central and Western District Concern Group) and Lau Kwok-wai (Executive Director of CACHe). In the presentations and discussions that followed, the invited guests shared their expertise and insight, giving the students a better understanding of the key issues, concerns and infrastructure development of the district. The forums also provided an opportunity for the students to present their preliminary design plans for the district and gain valuable feedback from the community representatives.

Part of the exercise was that students got to face the challenges of creating a setting that allowed them to engage with community members. For instance, it was very difficult for them to get the public to join the community forums despite the good location of our venue, a well-respected local institution in Sai Ying Pun. However, the street exhibitions proved to be more successful in providing the students an opportunity to interact directly with members of the community. Here, residents were not asked to come to a formal event in an institutional setting, but instead, students brought their works onto the main street of Sai Ying Pun, where they mounted their panels and openly engaged with residents and visitors of the district. The street exhibitions also showed which locations in the district would lend themselves better for public events than others and why. Passers-by less likely engaged in longer discussions on the steep and slippery slope of Centre Street. Rather, the students learned through experience that the best place for street exhibitions was a small, leveled, space adjacent to the entrance to the Sai Ying Pun wet-market on Third Street. It proved to be very appropriate for informal encounters and longer conversations. Students found this place for their second street exhibition, learning from their experience of mounting the first exhibition on Centre Street. After the street exhibition they organized a screening of their videos, thus changing their position from observer to a publicly exposed actor. The same strategy was used by the author in collaboration with Prof. Ming Jay Kang at the IFoU Summer School at Beijing University of Technology which also focused on the integration of a new subway line into an older district (here: Qiantiao district).

The combination of the self-organized community forums, street exhibitions and film screening allowed both the students and the research team to reflect on the conditions, pedestrian access and rights in public space. One of the challenges encountered and discussed was the language barrier, as many, especially older, residents in Sai Ying Pun only spoke Cantonese, while most team members spoke English and Mandarin. Due to students' use of Mandarin in their interaction with the community also the latent tensions between Hong Kong residents and mainland Chinese surfaced.

While the informal setting of street exhibitions has big advantages over the formal setting of community forums, they remain limited in reaching out and giving a representative view on the concerns and aspirations of the community at large.

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As the next step, therefore, the research team started to collaborate with a high school in Sai Ying Pun (King's College) in a production of video interviews of local residents by their students and a follow-up interactive exhibition in the district (see below).

Fig.9 to Fig.10 - The second community forum and street exhibition in Sai Ying Pun. (photos MScUDxCUHK)

Fig.11 - Location of the second street exhibition (in the background) as viewed from the Sai Ying Pun Market. (photo MScUDxCUHK)

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Study Trip - Community Spaces and Urban Activism in Taipei

During the term in November 2012, the studio participants visited Taipei for a study trip on community spaces and urban activism, organized with the help of Prof. Min Jay Kang and his students at National Taiwan University. While the applicability of Western examples to an Asian context can be limited when it comes to questions dealing with local street culture and the general living environment and microclimate in high-density cities, perspectives from other Asian cities might be more productive to inform projects in Hong Kong. In addition, Taipei and Hong Kong share important similarities: they are open, high-density societies with a modern Asian culture, facing high development pressure. Due to its particular political development in the 1990s, Taipei had developed a vibrant scene of urban activism, which started to gain influence on parts of its urban planning processes. It was thus important for our team to see such examples as the "temporary privately owned public spaces" created by the Taipei Beautiful Series, which gives a FAR bonus to owners who want to develop their land if they temporarily make this land accessible as greenery space for the community under specific requirements for the public participation process and their design. Another new initiative are the Urban Regeneration Stations (URS), small incubators for community activities developed by the public office in collaboration with artists and academics in dialog with the community (Lien & Shih, 2012). The experience of these places and the understanding of their underlying motives gave important inspirations for the studio work.

Fig.12 - Visiting the temporary community garden "Happy Farm" created within the Taipei Beautiful Series. (photo MScUDxCUHK)

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Different Histories and Prospects in Hong Kong and the West

In the West, community workshops became part of architecture teaching in the 1960s, but the strong interest in participatory design faded in many architecture schools in the mid-1970s (Schuman, 2012). In response to neo-liberalism (Harvey, 2005), the financial crisis and the Arab Spring, as well as a critique of a formalistic architectural education, emerged a fresh interest in public spaces paired with political and environmental activism in recent years. The earlier experiences in Western architecture and urban programs raise the question of the prospects of linking urban design and community interaction today in Hong Kong.

After big-scale, federal-funded urban renewal projects collapsed in the United States (Klemek, 2011), it became increasingly difficult for New York, Philadelphia, Detroit and others to pay for urgent investments in public infrastructure, public space, and housing, which accelerated the dramatic decline of their inner-city neighborhoods in the 1970s. At the time when federal support for large urban interventions ended, the younger generations of influential architects and theorists shifted their attention to the exploration of architecture form (followed by an interest in the development of new digital tools which was similarly restricted its scope to the design and fabrication of architectural objects). This was consistent with the disappointment of and suspicion against the large urban schemes emphatically proposed by the "masters" of modern architecture and planning in the 1950-60s. The focus on the explorations of new architectural forms, seen first as a way to withdrawal, then, under the new order of neo-liberalism and the new paradigm of the competition of cities for foreign direct foreign investments, led seamlessly to the emergence of "iconic buildings" for city marketing from Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao to Coop Himmelb(l)au's Cultural Centre and Opera in Mongolia.

However, during the important time of the 1970s, Hong Kong's situation substantially differed from that in the United States. The British colonial government invested little in public amenities and housing in the districts in which the rapidly growing Chinese population lived and left their development mainly to private Hong Kong Chinese investors. The main concern was to keep up with efficient movements of people and goods and maintaining social peace between the generally segregated European and Chinese communities. This changed slowly after the Japanese occupation. In the early postwar period, there had been considerations to develop a garden city in Kowloon and implement slum-clearing schemes in the Western Districts of Hong Kong Island, which was similar in spirit to urban renewal schemes in the West. But it was soon abandoned and development in the older districts was left to the private sector.

In the financial boom years of the early 1960s, Hong Kong transformed from a trading port with mainly 19th century colonial buildings, Chinese shop-tenement houses and warehouses, into a city with modern high risers, increasingly overcrowded residential areas, factory estates and squatter settlements (Tieben, Woo and Yuet, 2008). The Chinese Civil War, Mao's Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution had brought one million mainland Chinese refugees per decade into the rather small territory of Hong Kong. And it required a much more fundamental approach to addressing the challenges that arose. An early event that triggered a change was the Shek Kip Mei fire in 1953 which made around 50000 residents of a squatter village homeless in one night. A large-scale resettlement program followed for the first time. As Manuel Castells reminds us, the intentions were not only humanitarian: The program also helped to secure land for development which would otherwise be occupied by the squatters and to make Hong Kong's manufacturing industry internationally competitive as wages could remain low if workers could find cheap accommodation provided by the government (Castells, 1990).

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As a response to the 1966-7 riots and the frustration of the younger generation of the local community, the colonial government launched a large-scale comprehensive public housing program in the early 1970s. This happened to be the same period when many US cities cut their investments in public facilities, housing and infrastructures.

It also was the same period, when Italian theoretian Manfredo Tafuri recommended architects to give up hopes to make any meaningful contribution to society, as that would be impossible from the start based on the dominant capitalist system (Tafuri, 1976). This view was developed based on the societal conditions in Italy and the US. And in fact at the same time in Milan the ambitious urban model of the Gallaratese residential complex (designed by Aymonino, Studio Ayde, and Aldo Rossi) was left uncompleted and became occupied by protesting architectural students (Conforti, 1980). The new period of withdrawal from large-scale urban projects, general lack of public funding, and critique of modernist top-down planning coincided with, what Charles Jencks then described, as "post-modernism" (Jencks, 1978). While community projects and public participation still had their relevance due in the declining urban areas, they lacked frameworks and funding to implement substantial projects.

Christopher Klemek presented the different consequences the transatlantic collapse of urban renewal had: in contrast to New York and London, in the cities Toronto and Berlin demands of activists could be more productively integrated into the official planning process (Klemek, 2011).
Also in the USA, alternative paths possible, for instance, in Portland and Seattle, where in the 1970s activists could gain influence on planning decisions and a new generation of politicians won elections with progressive new social and environmental programs, making the main decisions for a sustainable and socially balanced development already at that time (Sanders, 2010).

Hong Kong now seems to be at a similar crossroad. On one hand trust in the government is eroded based on its collusions with interests from Beijing and local property tycoons, housing prices are soaring and; on the other hand, new forms of protest are taking place, with a more confrontational undertone. However, there are also initiatives on the side of the HKSAR Planning Bureau, which show awareness of the accumulated problems and came up with the Urban Renewal Strategy review and a range of new policy and guideline initiatives. First lessons for an alternative approach how to bridge the gap between government planning and community aspirations could be learned from Portland and Seattle in USA and Taipei in Asia. While urban design in many places lacks the political and economic basis to influence city development, the situation, Hong Kong would have some positive preconditions if planning could align with citizens aspirations: Despite its capitalist economic system, almost 50% of the population live in public housing, as well as much of the land (although not in the New Territories) and the transportation system are public.

With the launch of the new MSc program, we follow Dana Cuff's observation: "While architects no longer presume to be able to design the entirety of what is urban, they also recognize that no one else is in a position to take on the charge." (Cuff, 2012, 409-413)

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The Way Forward

A general problem of integrating "real world" community participation in educational programs within a limited timeframe is that it first needs a long time to build up relationships and trust with the people living in the concerned area. As the contact is slowly formed the term time is already over and thus the attention turns to other topics. In addition, this program did not start with an official mandate and as street spaces, alleys and terraces are not considered as important and valuable public spaces, there were no governmental schemes to improve those places. These challenges to make a meaningful contribution to community life were knowingly accepted, as the point of this approach is to formulate a "community benefit plan" independent of or as a balance to the dominating property development-driven urban renewal processes. The advantage of our project is that it can emerge over a longer period of time, out of the two years of RGC research funding. In addition, aware of the difficulty in getting in contact with the local community, the author is currently launching the outreach project "Magic Carpet: Re-envisioning community space in Sai Ying Pun" with the aim of further strengthening the link to the community by organizing activities in public spaces of Sai Ying Pun. This project will include several outdoor screening events of video interviews with residents on Centre Street, the heart of the district, followed by a participatory exhibition at the Conservancy Association Centre for Heritage (CACHe) in which ideas for the community benefit plan will be presented for broader discussion. Students from the local high school King's College will prepare the video interviews. One of the main ideas is that through the outdoor screening event, Centre Street will be transformed into a space of imagination and discussion. The project is developed in close collaboration with Colin Fournier (currently Visiting Professor at School of Architecture) and Anthony Fung, Director of the School of Journalism and Communication at CUHK.

Fig.13 - First test screening of students' videos on Centre Street, 2012.

Fig.14 - An open cinema event planned to take place on Centre Street in Autumn 2013. The event will feature video interviews of 100 local residents conducted by high school students of King's College. (photo and montage MScUDxCUHK)

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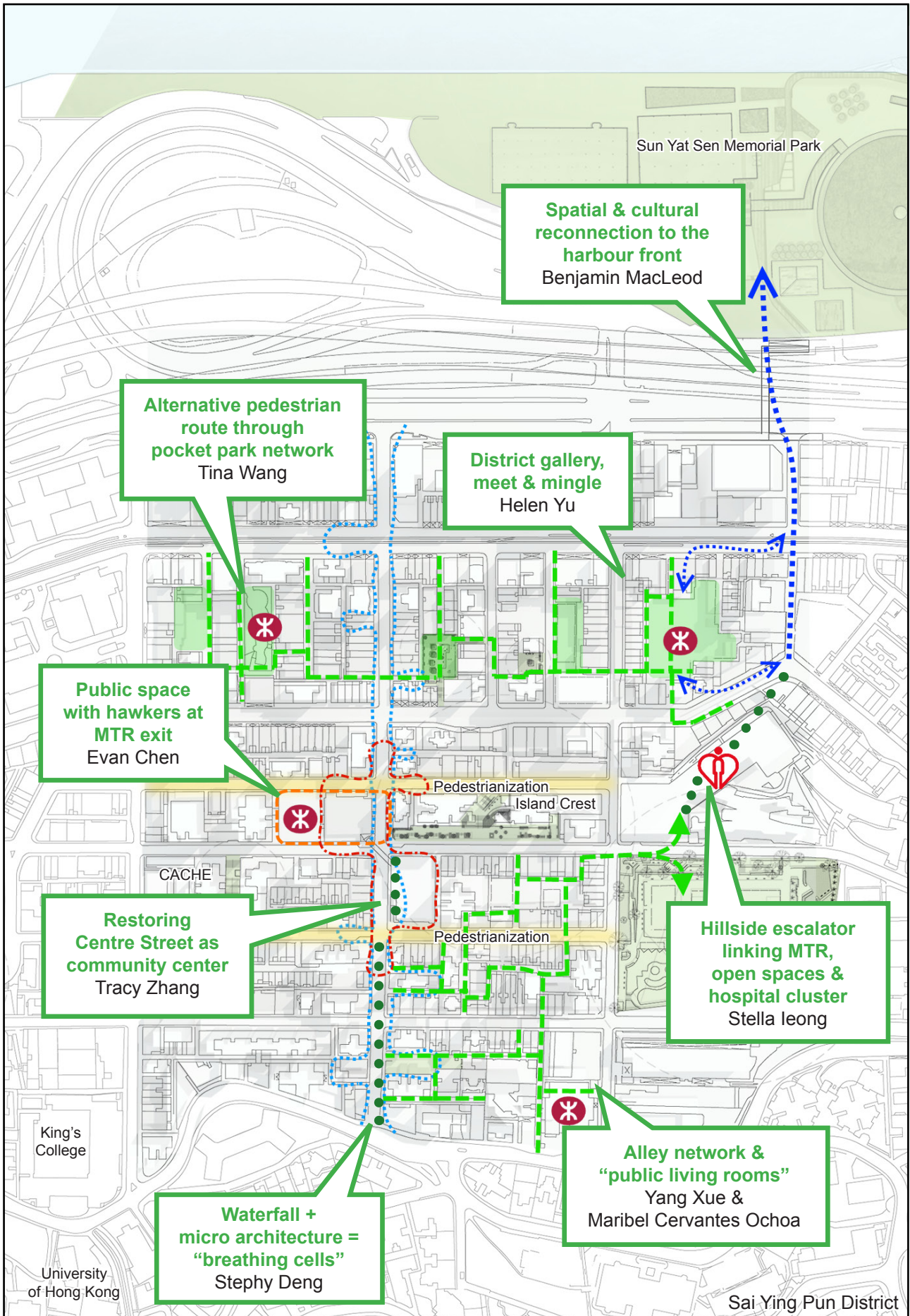
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The following pages present a selection of projects of the above discussed urban design studio.

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Centre Street

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Sun Yat Sen Memorial Park

Spatial & cultural reconnection to the harbour front
Benjamin MacLeod

Alternative pedestrian route through pocket park network
Tina Wang

District gallery, meet & mingle
Helen Yu

Public space with hawkers at MTR exit
Evan Chen

Pedestrianization
Island Crest

CACHE

Restoring Centre Street as community center
Tracy Zhang

Pedestrianization

Hillside escalator linking MTR, open spaces & hospital cluster
Stella Ieong

King's College

Waterfall + micro architecture = "breathing cells"
Stephy Deng

Alley network & "public living rooms"
Yang Xue & Maribel Cervantes Ochoa

University of Hong Kong

Sai Ying Pun District

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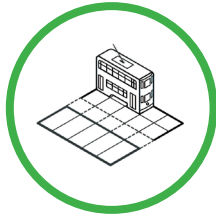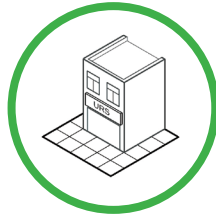
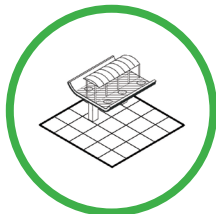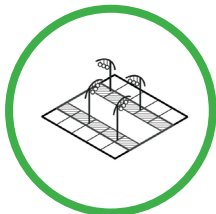# Harbourfront Reconnection

Ben MacLeod

URBAN TOOLS

TEMPORAL PEDESTRIANIZATION

URBAN REGENERATION STATION

SEAFOOD FOOTBRIDGE

DISTINCTIVE FURNISHINGS

Sai Ying Pun has long been a center for trade in dried seafood due to its proximity to the wharves and warehouses which formerly lined the harbor front. While the industry reached its peak in the 1980s, there remain a great number of dried seafood shops in Sai Ying Pun. During the 1990s, land reclamation and highway infrastructure associated with the new airport project created a major barrier between Sai Ying Pun and its waterfront. This proposal seeks to reestablish the district's strong connection to the sea, through both a physical connection to the new metro station as well as an emphasis on the heritage of the seafood trade. It introduces a new footbridge design, pedestrianization, street furniture, and an Urban Regeneration Station. Urban Regeneration Stations were launched in Taipei to revitalize older districts and strengthen their community sense. Here the station uses an existing building to reveal the district's history and culture of its seafood trade.

Seafood Heritage

Since the mid-19th century, Sai Ying Pun and neighbouring Sheung Wan district have been a centre for trade in dried seafood, owing in part to their proximity to the wharves and godowns (warehouses) that formerly lined the waterfront. Products arrived here from sea, were processed in the three or four storey shophouses typical of the time, and dried on the roofs. At first, salted fish was the dominant industry, with over 200 shops selling the product in Sai Ying Pun alone. Gradually, dried seafood became the prevailing focus of businesses in the area, especially as Hong Kong's population became wealthier and could afford a greater variety of products.

While the popularity of the industry peaked in the 1980s, there remains a huge number of dried seafood shops stretching from Sheung Wan to Sai Ying Pun, especially on Des Veoux Road West and the streets which intersect it.

Community Problems

1. Poor access to the harbourside park

2. Congestion, now and in the future

3. Inhospitable street environments
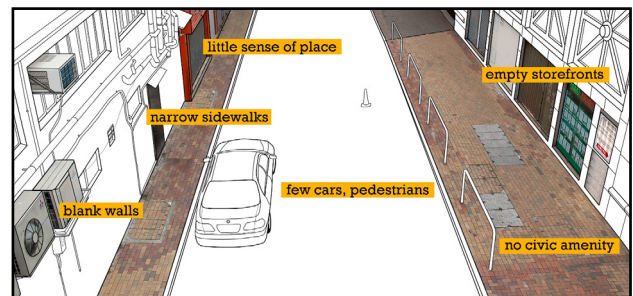
4. Gentrification and urban "renewal"

Fig.1 to Fig.6 - Identification of community assets and problems.

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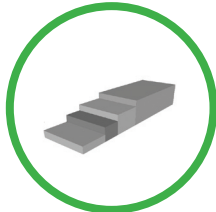*Fig.7 - A new escalator, combined with streetscape improvements, helps revitalized an underused streetscape.*

① Pedestrianization of Wilmer Street (except for a shared space to accommodate an existing driveway) and new street furniture.

② Scheduled pedestrianization of a section of the south side of Des Voeux Road, whereby deliveries take place at off-peak hours.

③ A new escalator at the north end of Wilmer Street, providing a visible and convenient route to the existing footbridge to the waterfront.

④ More diverse and active business at street level, through a more porous streetscape and by issuing hawker licences.

⑤ Urban regeneration station (URS): A storefront interactive interpretive centre aimed at educating tourists and locals alike about the uses of dried seafood products.

⑥ Phase II: Reconstruction of the footbridge to Sun Yat Sen Park to accommodate dried seafood processing. Design has sound and weather proofing in mind.

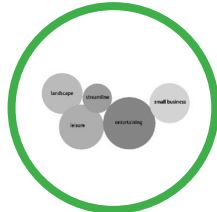*Fig.8 - "Urban acupuncture" – small interventions combine to transform this micro-district.*

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# Re-Envisioning Centre Street

Tracy Zhang

URBAN TOOLS

PLATFORM SLOPE

FLEXIBLE-USE STREET

This project focuses on the section of Centre Street between the upcoming MTR station exit (on Second Street) and the new escalator (on Third Street). It is the geographic center of the district and it had been full of life until the 1970s. However, after the relocation of the old street market into two indoor market complexes and the practice of traffic safety measures in the 1980s, which separated this central community space from daily activities in the surrounding area, Centre Street became deserted. In addition, its steep slope and slippery surface make the space difficult to use. This scheme aims to restore the importance of Centre Street by transforming it into a street space usable for multiple functions, such as informal encounters, leisure purposes and festivals (e.g. film screenings and celebrations of seasonal festivals). The link of Centre Street to adjacent shops and the Sai Ying Pun Market would be enhanced, so that the street could recapture its role as the center of the district.
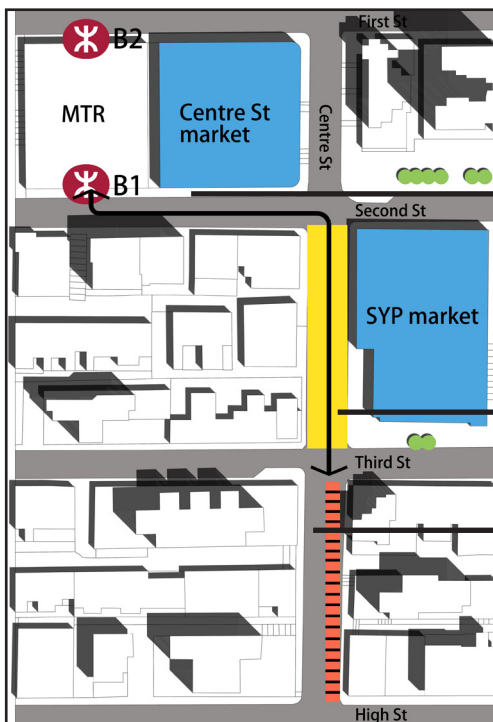
MTR B1 Exit
The completion of the MTR station will bring a lot of people. When the stream of people rushes out of the exit, the street may become very crowded. Sharing the space with cars will be unsafe for people.

Escalator (Third St. to High St.)
The escalator helps people go up and down easily. Residents of high areas tend to use it when they go back home, and people who want to go to the high areas will take the escalator .

Centre Street (Sai Ying Pun Market Area)

Fig.1 - A streetscape sanitized: market activity has been forced into two insular buildings. What little public space remains is difficult to use.

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Fig.2 - The street is made a hospitable centre for a wide variety of uses.

Daily Life

Festival

Weekly Market

Show

Market Escalator

Escalator

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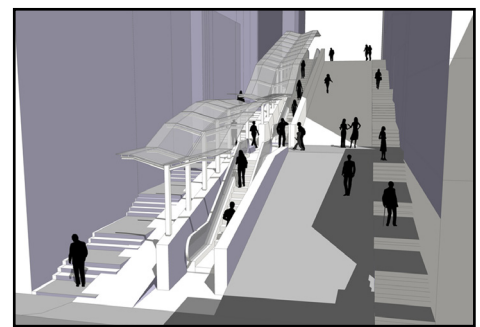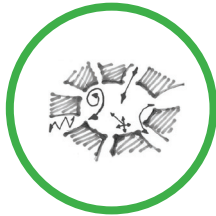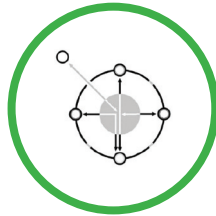
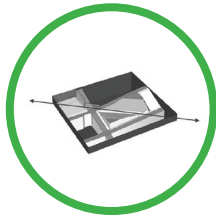# Re-Creating Sai Ying Pun's Public Square

Evan Chen

URBAN TOOLS

CREATING CENTRALITY
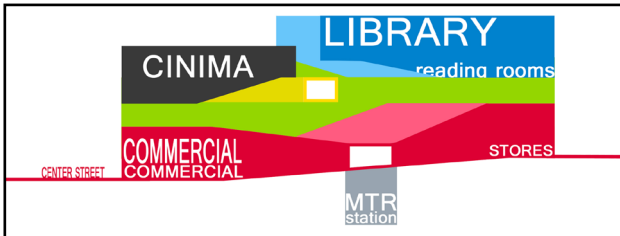
MAKE SHORTCUTS

CREATE SIGHTLINES

Fig.1 - Proposed library and cinema, based on community feedback regarding what amenities the community lacks.
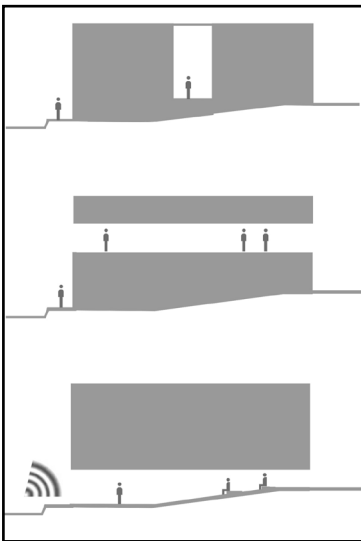

Fig.2 - The building mass is opened to improve public interaction.

MTR
To make full use of the limited space in Sai Ying Pun to create a comfortable and inviting MTR station exit to remit the potential overload of the new West Island Line and the increasing density of the district.

PUBLIC SPACE
To create a new sheltered public space on and inspired by the original public square on the same site. Due to the hot and rainy climate in Hong Kong, this sheltered space offers a possible venue for a public library and a cinema, which according to the public feedback at the street exhibitions seem to be desired by the residents in the district.

COMMERCIAL SPACE
To transform the less successful Centre Street Market into a more effective and lively environment which merges hawkers, stores and the market together and optimizes the use of space.

STREET
To widen the narrow sidewalks and connect the new MTR exit with Centre Street through the sheltered open space. The design also offers a solution to the steepness of Centre Street, introducing escalators, elevators, ramps and stairs in the new sheltered space to connect different streets along the slope.

Fig.3 - Sai Ying Pun market in 1955. How can we reintroduce this animated atmosphere to today's Centre Street? (Photo: H. Morrison)

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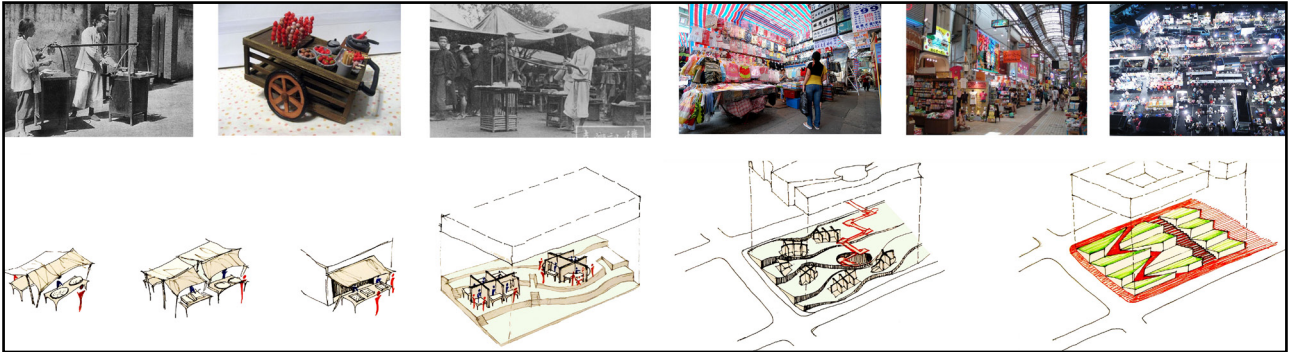
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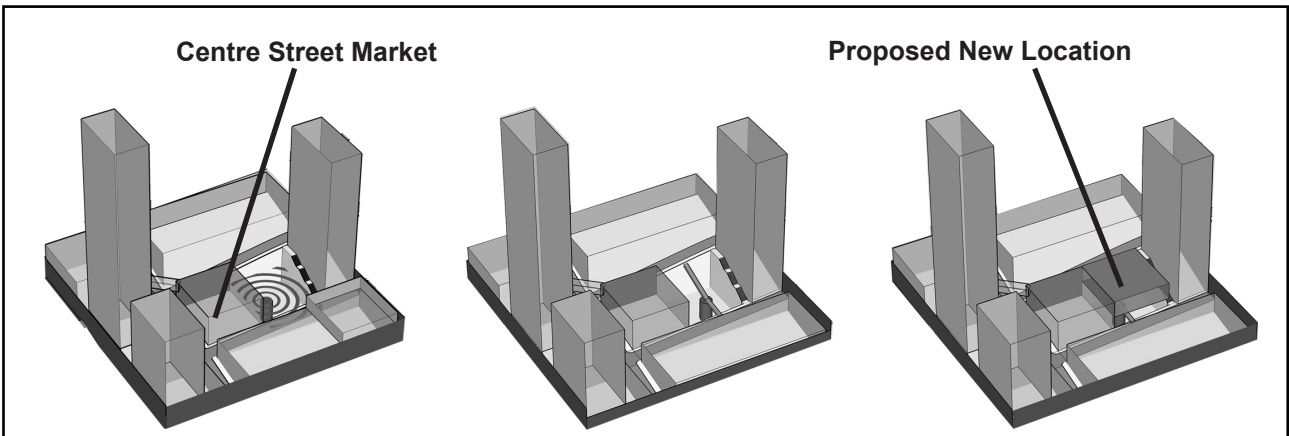*Fig.4 - Provision of space for traditional hawking activities.*

Fig.5 - The future site for station exits B1 and B2 is disconnected from activity and could be relocated to a more optimal location on Centre Street.
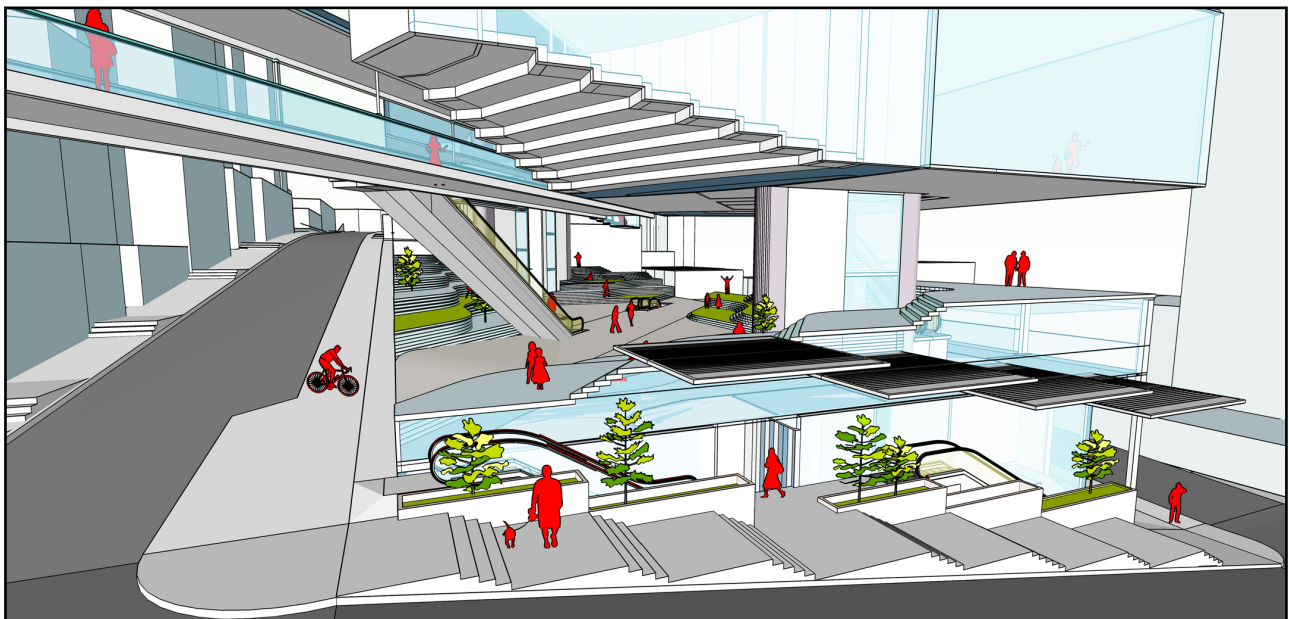

Fig.6 - Due to the hot climate and rainy seasons, sheltered public space in Hong Kong is valued by residents.

Waterfall Street Life

Stephy Deng

URBAN TOOLS

WATER ELEMENT

MICRO ARCHITECTURES

While my team was making a video on Sai Ying Pun's street spaces, we observed a small stream of water on Centre Street that later disappeared into a culvert as it traveled down the slope. Hong Kong, due to its tropical climate, often experiences heavy rainfalls, which could develop into dangerous storms and floods during the typhoon season. Designing a path to divert the "falling water" can be a way to make the street life safer, more vibrant, and convenient. The district of Sai Ying Pun is built on a slope, which is very steep towards the peak and less so nearer the harbor. And I observed that activities along Centre Street change according to the steepness of the slope. Therefore I decided to make use of the waterfall element to reveal the changing character of the slope. At the same time, the project links the top of Centre Street with the waterfront by a specially designed topography. The water element connects with new micro-architectures to form several micro "breathing-communities" to invigorate the whole street and its surrounding.
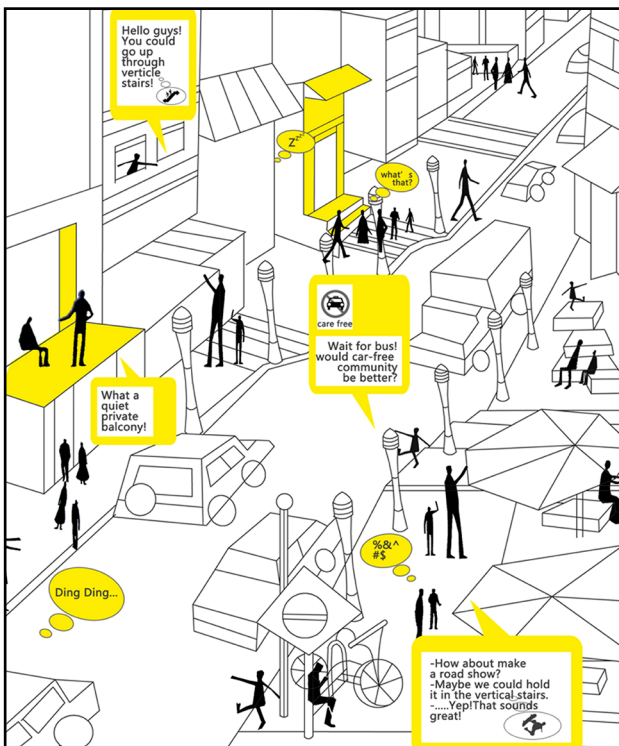
Fig.1 - Community workshop feedback presentation.

Main Axis

water run fast,
speed of walking slow

In the Flat Slope

Residents walk breezily and more
people want to stay in street

In the Slow Slope

Speed of walking become seriously
seldom people would stay in street

In the Steep Slope

Going up beome one of diffcult problem
less people like to climb the steep slope

Fig.2 - Stills from research videos.

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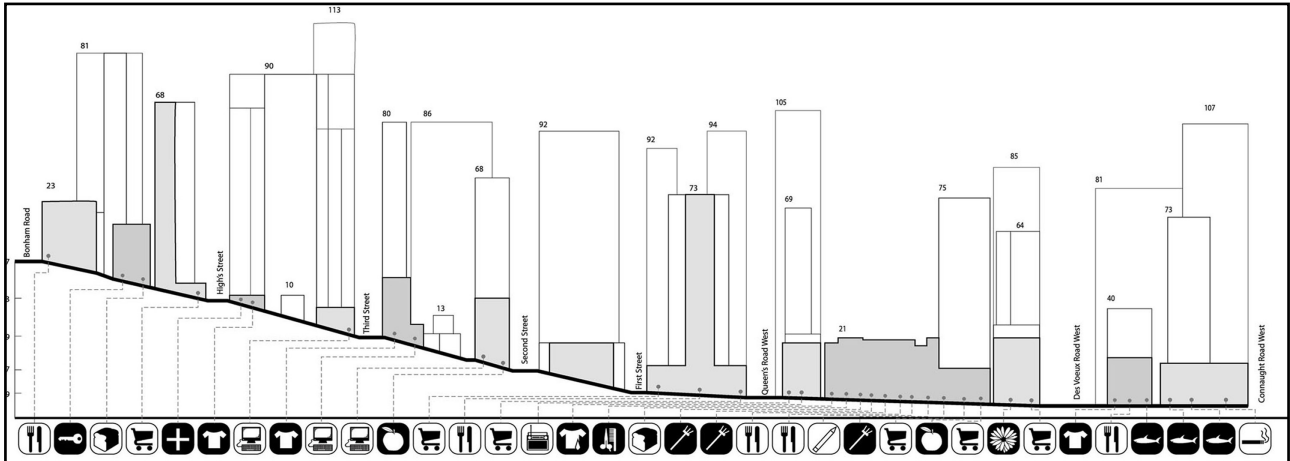
Fig.3 - Centre Street programs.
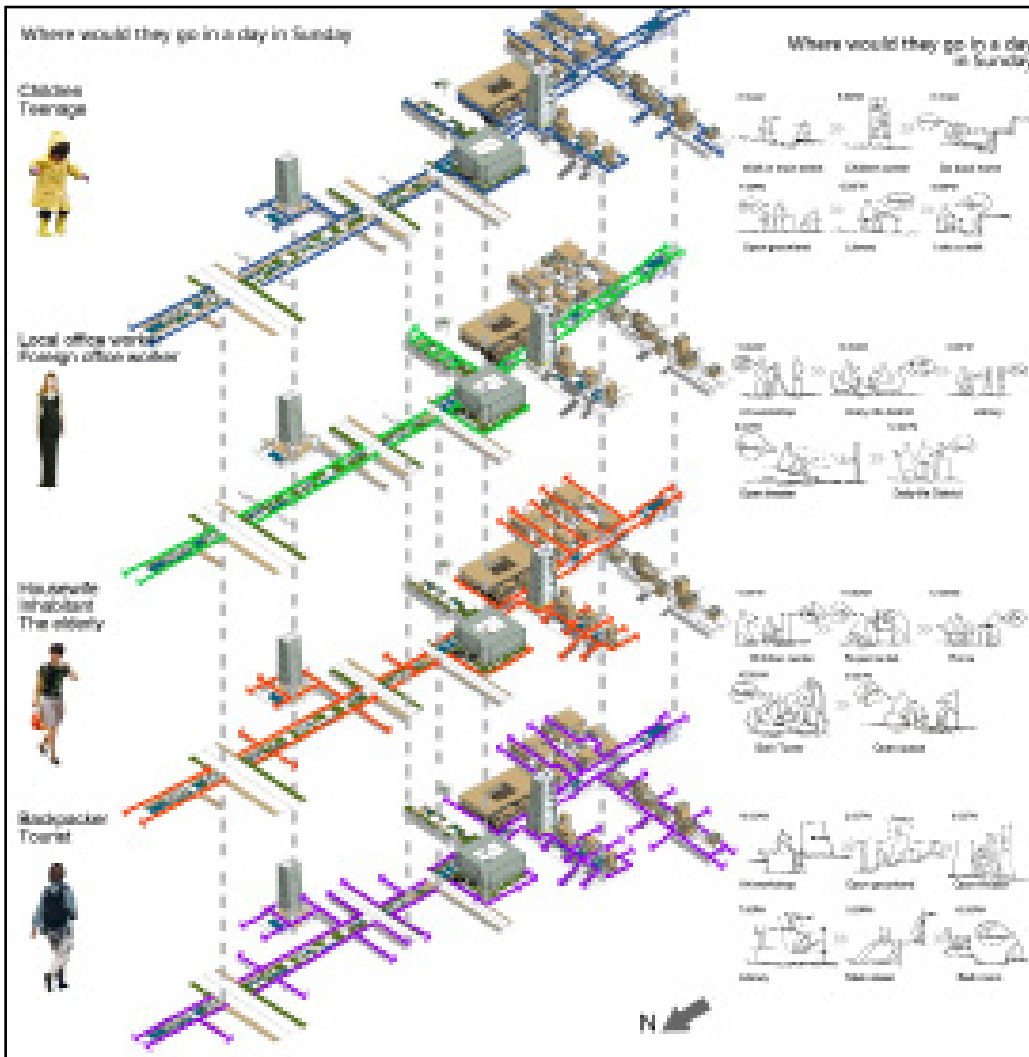
Fig.4 - Envisioned activities of different users.

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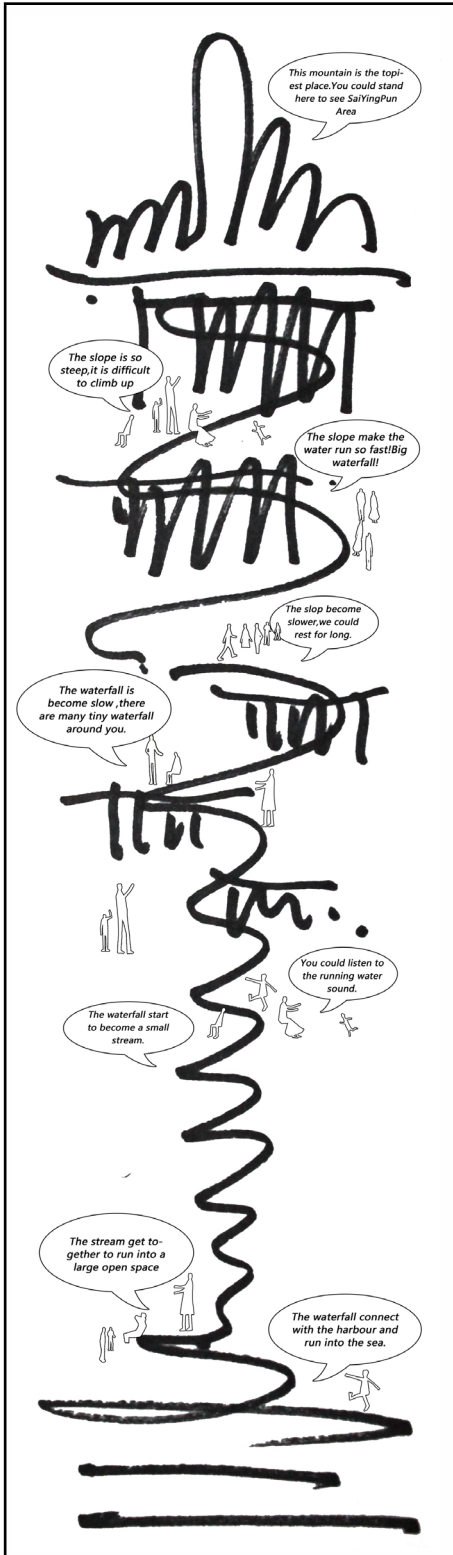
Fig.5 - The character of the water feature changes as the slope of the hill becomes less steep.

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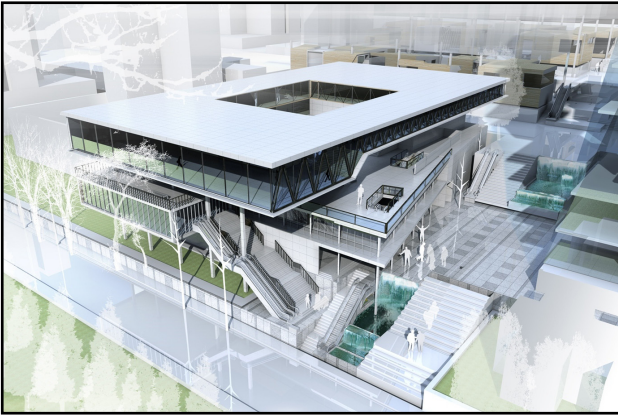
Fig.6 - Redesigned Sai Ying Pun market.
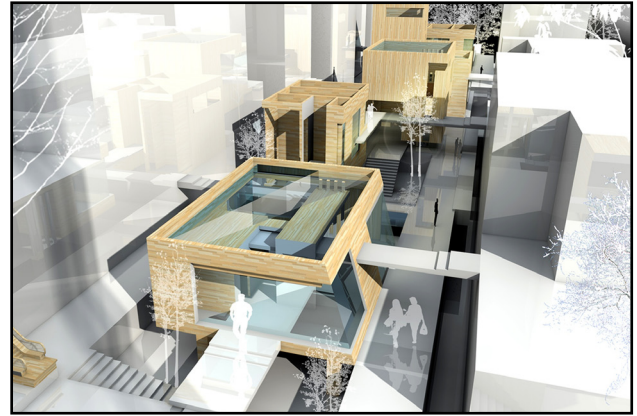
Fig.7 - Terrace spaces activated by micro-architectures.

STEPS
use the steps to connect different parts and provide a leisure space

PATHS
use the paths to connect the pocket space or some alleys space

The paths could connect with the steps and some platforms to provide the users a continuous walking line

LEISURE SPACES
provide the possibility of activities in a open area

PLATFORM
use the platform to provide users to have a rest place when going up

WATERFALL
use the distance of the slope to make waterfall to be a charming scene

ESCALATOR
It is more convinent for the ederly to use escalator to go up

Fig.8 - Interventions along Centre Street.

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Pocket Parks Necklace

Tina Wang

URBAN TOOLS

GROUND-LEVEL COMMERCE

LINK OPEN SPACES

TREE CANOPY

PERGOLA

In the research stage, my team made videos of Sai Ying Pun's pocket parks at different times of the day from an overhead perspective, analyzing the behavior of various users. Then we studied the relationship between physical environment and microcli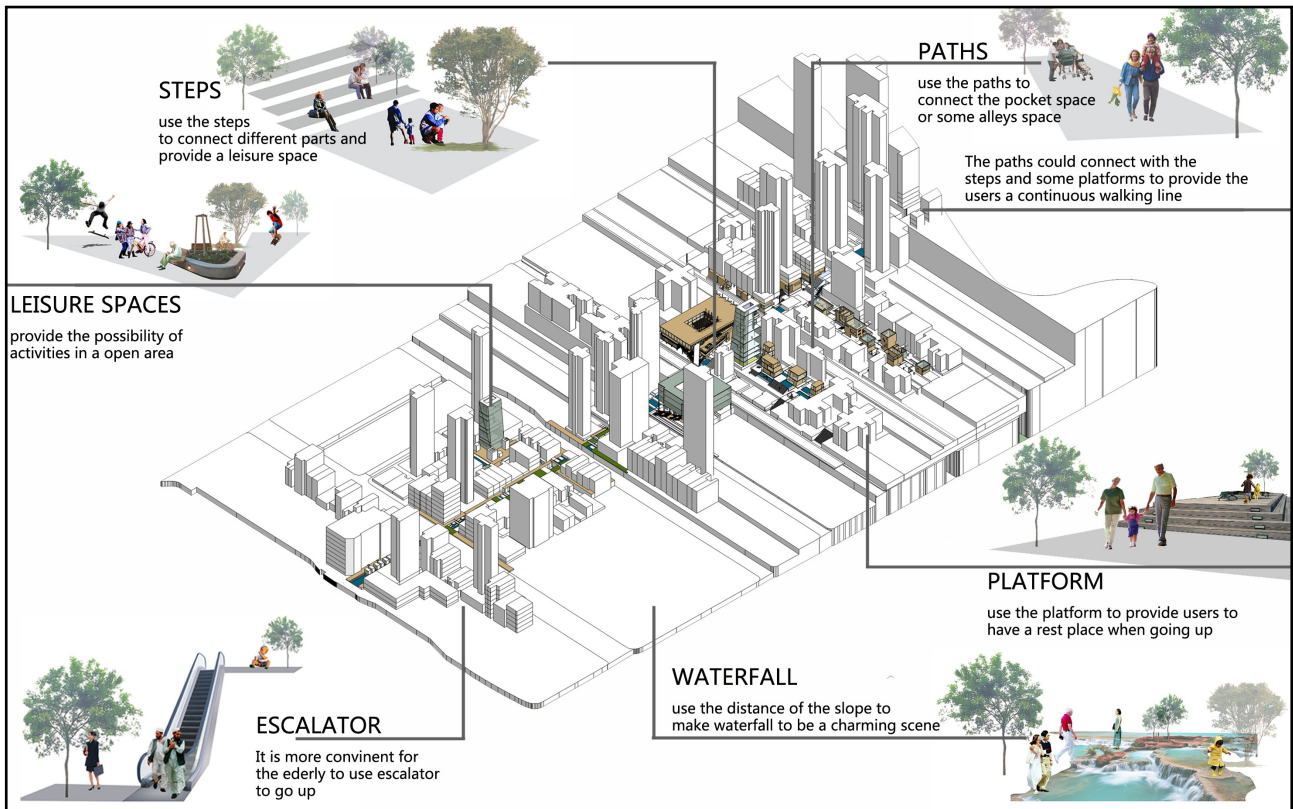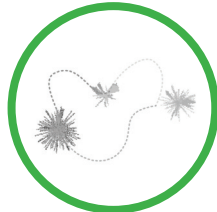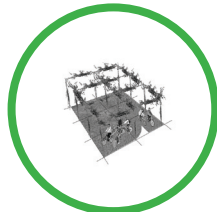mate using the software "ENVI-met", connecting human activities with environmental factors. During the two street exhibitions we collected feedback of residents about the problems and potentials of the pocket parks, based on which we developed a more thoughtful design for the spaces. In the design stage, we proposed the concept of a "Pocket Parks Necklace" that addressed the vulnerability of pocket parks in urban transformation processes and their problematic accessibility, which was analyzed using the software "Depthmap". The design seeks to provide a barrier-free access system, which could be embedded into the unique topography of Sai Ying Pun to revitalize its pocket parks.
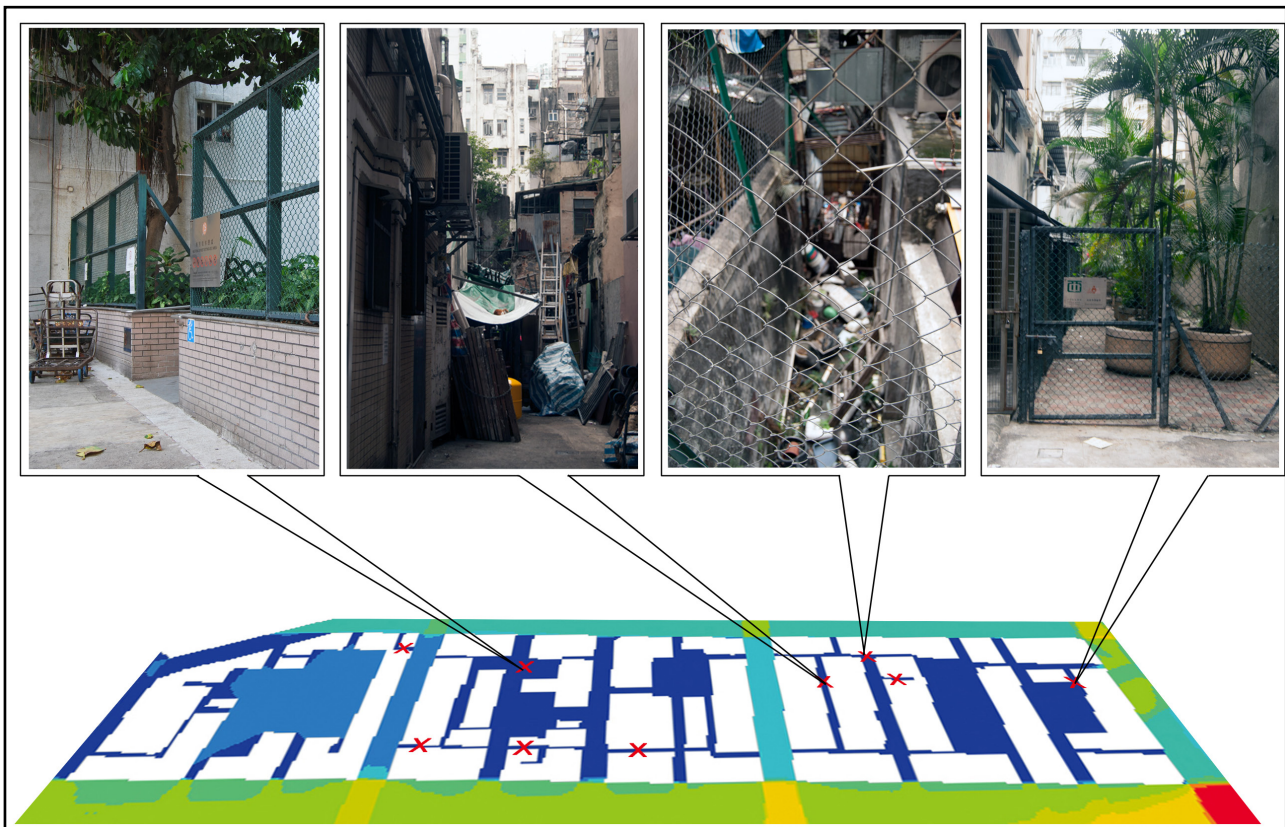
Fig.1 - Current condition of backyard spaces. Parts of the government-managed open spaces have been fenced in and used for storage.

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Fig.2 - At a community workshop we collected feedback on three different potential spatial atmospheres for a pocket park site.

Fig.3 - Rearranged pocket park surrounding new MTR exit B3, incorporating a carpark covered by a landscaped deck, as well as an elevator managed by the private sector.

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Increasing Diversity of Pocket Parks

Helen Yu

URBAN TOOLS

URBAN
REGENERATION
STATION

WATER
COLLECTING
SUNSHADE
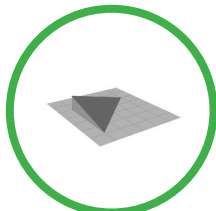
GREEN
SLOPE
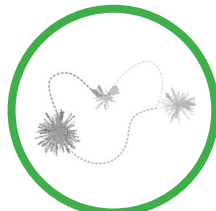
LINK
OPEN
SPACES

The new Sai Ying Pun MTR station will not only help reduce vehicular traffic and enhance the district's connectivity with the broader metro region, but also bring new opportunities for the reg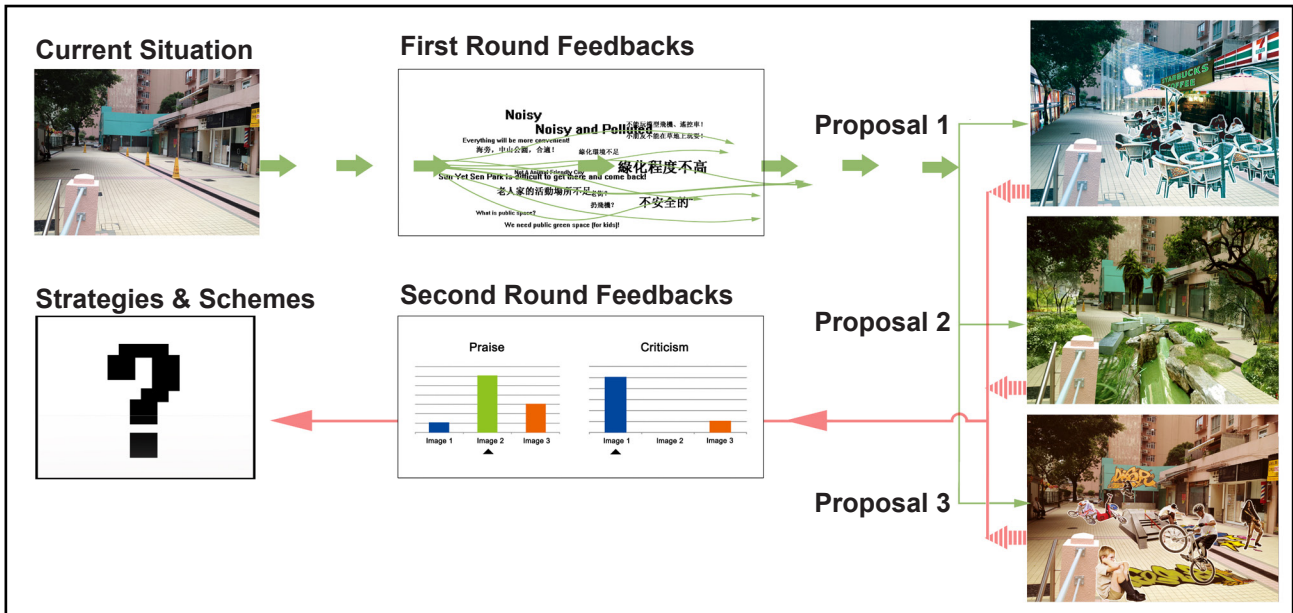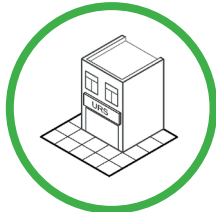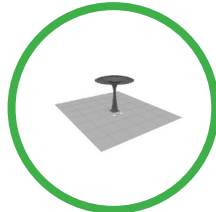eneration of old districts in Hong Kong. This project was developed based on a team research of the relationship between microclimate and users' activities in Sai Ying Pun's pocket parks as well as the study of their weak accessibility and connectivity. Combining the results of these studies with community feedback, I developed the idea of connecting the isolated pocket parks through a green network, creating new platforms for exchange and sharing between residents and visitors. Currently, Hong Kong's pocket parks are designed according to restrictive standards without community contributions, making them all look the same. The project aims to offer a higher diversity in terms of spatial experience and thus encourage a broader range of activities in pocket parks. Varying designs are proposed for the different pocket parks within the network, according to their specific preconditions and locations. Their characters range from green gardens for the predominant use of local residents to more vibrant hubs next to the new MTR exits, where people can gather, socialize and learn about the district while they eat and relax.
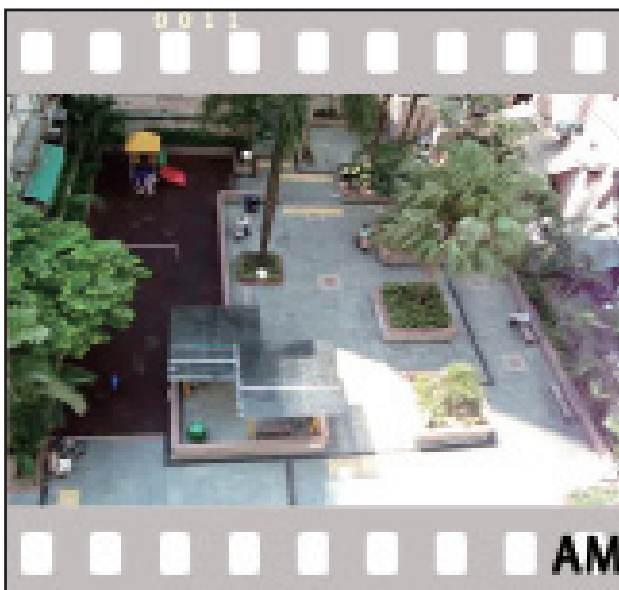
Fig.1 - Video study investigating the variation of activities in pocket parks depending on time of day.

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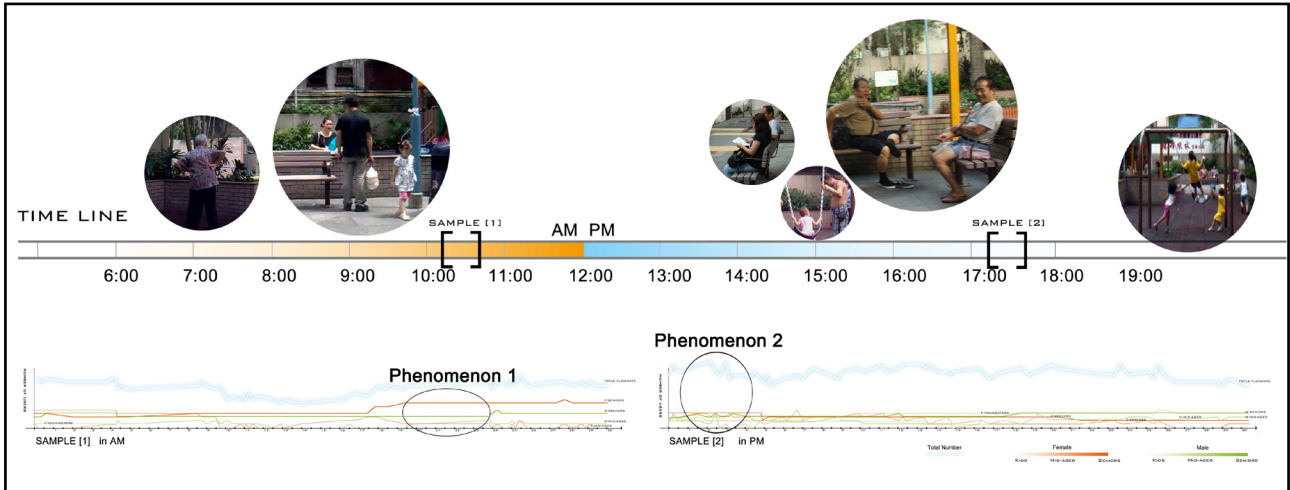
Fig.2 - Survey of activities by time of day.
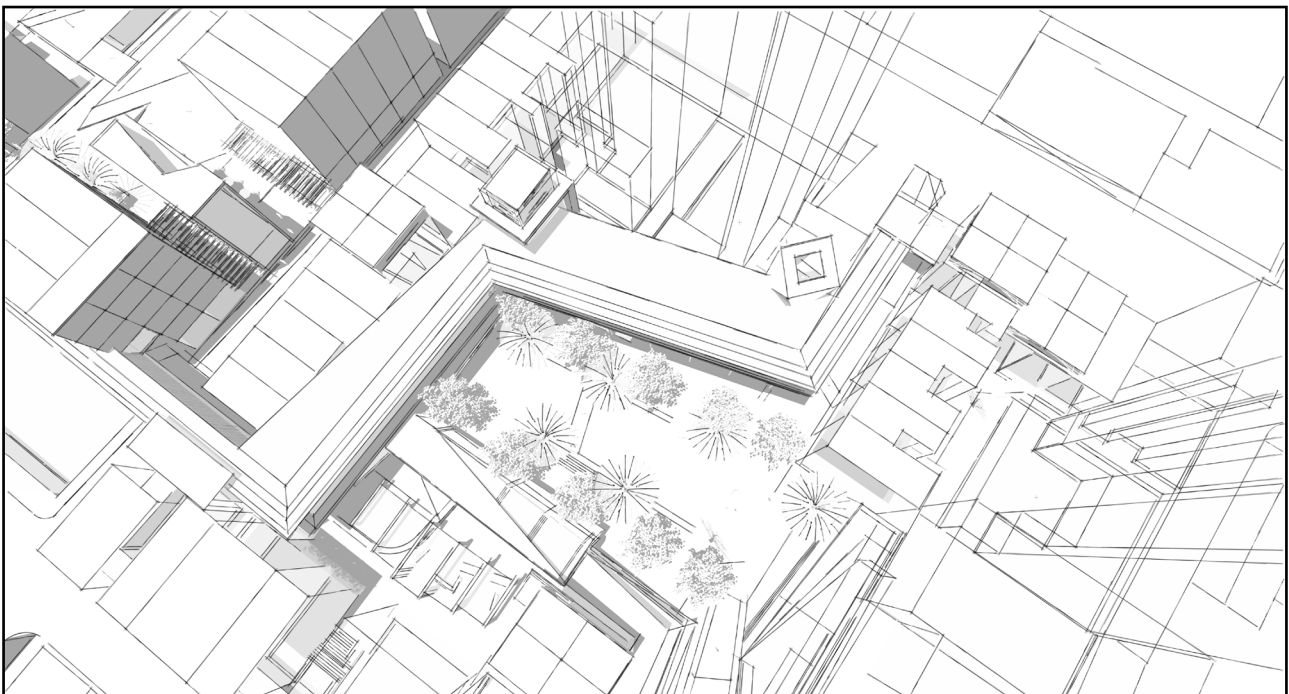
Fig.3 - Redesigned pocket park at new MTR exit A, providing a covered walking with displays of local culture and history, food and beverage vendors, and places to rest.

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Alleys as Urban Living Rooms

Maribel Cervantes Ochoa
Yang Xue

URBAN TOOLS

GROUND-LEVEL COMMERCE
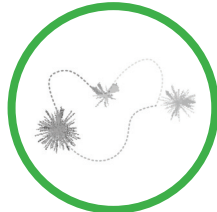
LINK OPEN SPACES

CHILDREN'S ART

PUBLIC ELEVATOR

"Given a fine location, it is difficult to design a space that will not attract people. What is remarkable is how often this has been accomplished… People like to sit where there are places for them to sit." (W.H. Whyte, 1980)

Our project aims to encourage people in Sai Ying Pun to leave their homes and spend time on getting to know their neighbors and appreciating the public spaces in the district. Alleys and terraces offer an alternative open space network to the busy streets. Due to their separation from vehicular traffic they are well suited to become "urban living rooms". However, the steep topography of Sai Yin Pun makes them difficult to reach. After identifying the ruptures in the network, this project proposes to insert ramps and elevators at strategic spots to enhance the accessibility and connectivity within the area. In addition, it provides movable furniture and organizes activities for those open spaces. Thus residents can come and stay on their daily walks, and enjoy the serenity offered by the alleys in Sai Ying Pun.

Fig.1 - Current conditions of alley and terrace spaces. There is a lack of public-private interfaces affecting social and commercial activities.

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A slope for seating and lying

Several small slope for children playing

Easy to form any shape

A longue chair for rest

Green blocks of landscape

components to the poles

BOLT AND HOOK: to fix components to the poles

SEATING: rubber mats made from old tires

Fill: concrete with light or heavy aggregates

RAMPS

STAIRS

ESCALATORS

FOLDING FURNITURE
CHAIR AND TABLE

LONGUE CHAIR

FOLDING GRASS

CASUAL SLOPE

CHILDREN'S SLOPE

MOVEABLE FURNITURE
SEATING
RUBBER MATS: soft material made from used tires

SEATING FOR A CROWD: mats are spread over the floor to accomodate more people

SEATING FOR EVERY DAY: mats are stacked around the poles to make a comfortable cusion

SHADING & PARTITIONS

BARRIER: hang some clothes and curtain reveals silhouettes behind

CANOPY: using cloth suspended between poles casting shadow of different intensities

PLANTERS

PLUG-IN: rainwater collection funnel for irrigation

SOIL CONTAINER: integrated in pole base

VINES: wires connecting different poles for easy climbing

POLE BASE: filled with soil

MAIN PURPOSE

Create Alley Network

Bring People UP and DOWN

Easy Way to Go UP and DOWN

Keep Alley Essence

TOOLS APPLIED

Change Facade

2nd Floor Entrance Community Center

1st Floor Free for Commerce

Ramp Network

Link Open Spaces

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Social Hybrid Infrastructure Networking in Sai Ying Pun

Stella Ieong

Related MArch Thesis Project

Assumption:

HIGH DENSITY

City / Old District
(2013 current situation)

POPULATION INCREASES

MORE EXTREME...
HIGHER DENSITY

City / same Old District
(2050 future situation)

Result:

A NEED FOR
SOCIAL DESIGN

Alternatives for a better community breathing space?!

City / same Old District
(2050 future situation)

In order to cope with a limited land supply, Hong Kong has grown vertically. It is now one of the highest density cities on earth. Streets and public spaces are therefore put under immense pressure, suffering from an increase of pedestrian activity and vehicular congestion. Tension arises in Sai Ying Pun as new development has taken place in this old district of Hong Kong. Conflicts will be exacerbated when a new metro station opens in 2014. Therefore, the principles behind the connectivity on the ground level must be reexamined. The urban fo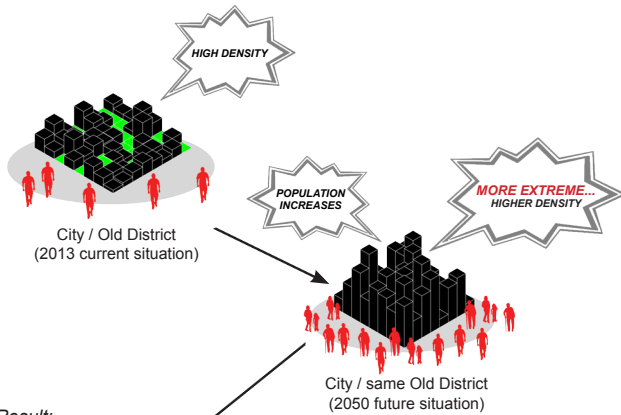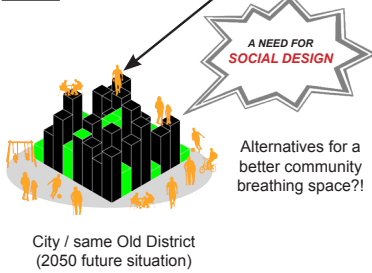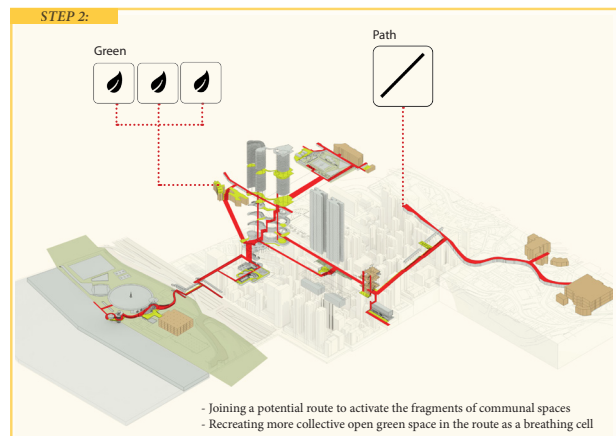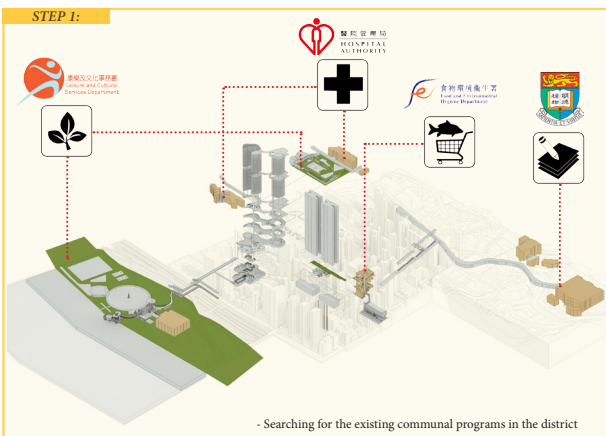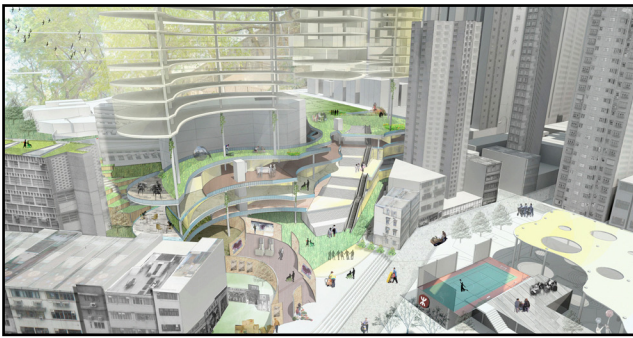rm of Sai Ying Pun is uniquely dense and very steep, and thus calls for a reconsideration of our approach to urban development. How can the urban fabric of Sai Ying Pun remain comfortable for residents even when further intensification takes place? In such an environment, can we find new ways for users of public space to traverse both the natural and built topography?

STEP 1:

- Searching for the existing communal programs in the district

STEP 2:

Green

Path

- Joining a potential route to activate the fragments of communal spaces
- Recreating more collective open green space in the route as a breathing cell

STEP 3:

Breathing space

- Breaking down the long path by Inserting new functional zones
- Regenerating market, dental hospital and mtr to activate the route

STEP 4:

Question: *Why selecting particularly the PDH?*

Proposed - new design of Philip Dental Hospital
- Integration and consideration of linkage to existing public facilities and assets;
- opportunity gives community benefits

V.S.

✕ URA approach - Island Crest
- Solid podium block provides inaccessible privately use space

Opportunity:
- urban process: not demolishing old residentials but regenerate hospital to increase density living

24HR Accessibility:
- 24 hours open areas for free access;
- Easy, direct visible public path provided by private ownership podium

Accessibility:
- Hidden Transit: not easy to find and low use

Programmatic support:
- provide casual needs and desire of people;
- path extends out to connect free open area

Programmatic support:
- more private facilities;
- more commercial and retail

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I. Density is not necessarily problematic if we can figure out new ways to approach public space in the vertical built environment.
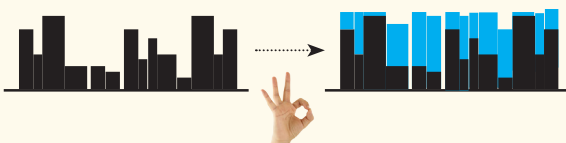
II. Hong Kong has many instances of 3-D network systems, but most stem from economic purposes: mechanic devices such as escalators and elevators are installed with only commercial considerations.

III. But there are other strategies which can plan for more community benefit. This project is a testing ground to experiment with the integration of a 3-D network that can link existing public facilities and assets in the district.
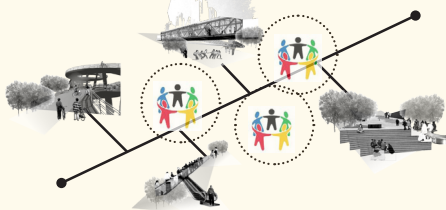
IV. A good precendent project is the new YIA building at CUHK. We can refer to it as a transferrable model for high density districts.

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1i) Landscape of retail
Hospital shops providing food a

1h) Landscape of hospital cluster
green terrace extension from park + shortcut path

1b) Landscape of free leisure
Sun Yat Sen Square Kite & Picnic Square
(existing)

1c) Landscape of sports activity
Climbing training centre

1a) Landscape of wandering
Waterfront View Deck + Resting Cafe

1d) Landscape of sports activity
SYS swimming centre
(existing)

1g) Landscape of high density
Dental +elderly care services
-Free 24 hours public zones and path (escalator and stairs)
owned by private developer

1e) Elevated pedestrian walkway
passing through the flyway

1f) Landscape of MTR cluster
show plaza + skateboard/BMX bowls

Waterfront - Victoria Harbour

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and supporting facilities

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