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Narrating the Mall City

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In her discussion of Hong Kong’s mall culture, Janet Ng notes that Hong Kong’s omnipresent shopping malls are not only vessels of capitalist development, but also local places where people are acculturated in everyday life. This can be seen, for example, in many literary works that focus on the construction of memories around various objects and spaces of consumption, memories that elicit strong sentiments amongst those who shared these experiences. These kinds of narratives have become more pronounced in recent years, with the growing nostalgia of “old Hong Kong” coming to encompass some of the older shopping malls that are under threat of demolition or significant makeover in order to attract tourists and multinational retail chains (FIG.1). This situation has prompted widespread criticisms of the profit-making mentality of landlords and developers on the one hand, and the failure of the government to protect the interests of Hong Kong citizens and local businesses on the other.

The mourning for the loss of older shopping malls and local retailers has rapidly transformed these places of consumerism – many of which once charged for having destroyed the older urban fabrics themselves – into “symbols of community” worthy of protection. This situation offers a new twist on the familiar critique of consumerist culture for segregating individuals from community life. Although resistance against urban renewal projects also tends to solidify collective action elsewhere, the narratives surrounding Hong Kong’s shopping malls and their associated “cherished local way of life” also underscore the specificity of histories and spatial practices. What then, are the historical processes that shaped the relations between the residents

1 Janet Ng, Paradigm City: Space, Culture and Capitalism in Hong Kong (New York: Sunny Press, 2009).
2 Ng, Paradigm City, 95-96.
3 The phenomena can be observed in many recent articles in Hong Kong’s local Chinese newspapers. For an example showing the nostalgic sentiment about the city’s old shopping malls, see 陳裕匡, “我與瓊華中心一起成長,” House News, 12 February 2013.
4 For a discussion on Hong Kong’s “malling process,” see Tai-lok Lui, “The malling of Hong Kong,” in Gordon Matthews and Tai-lok Lui eds., Consuming Hong Kong (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2001), 25.
of this “mall city” and the urban environment? What kinds of social imaginaries have Hong Kong’s shopping malls helped engender in the past, and what memories have been invoked and mobilized in the present in the attempt to wrestle these places from further transformation?

In the following, I consider these questions by examining the development of one of Hong Kong’s iconic shopping malls, the New Town Plaza in Shatin. Completed in 1984, the New Town Plaza has over the years become recognized as key to the success of Shatin’s new town development. Although many of the Plaza’s physical features were reminiscent of those of other shopping centers, to many Shatin’s residents it was a special place to which they had developed strong attachments. However, this sentiment began to change after 2005, when the Plaza underwent a series of renovations that resulted in the loss of much of its original character and the eventual closure of many long time retail shops that could not afford the escalating rent. While local residents lamented that they can no longer relate to the mall in the way they did in the past, these changes also ushered in a series of “bottom-up” initiatives to revive the sense of place and “community spirit.” These initiatives, along with those that have proliferated in other neighborhoods across the city, illustrate the widening contestations over urban renewal and conservation in an economy increasingly predicated on market optimization amidst ongoing political change.5

The New Town and the Mall: A Symbiotic Development

The completion of the New Town Plaza in 1984 was arguably a historical moment in Hong Kong’s urban development. Although not the first shopping centre built as an integral part of a housing estate, it was by far the largest and the most spectacular, boosting an unprecedented one million square feet of retail space that also included a flagship Japanese department store, the Yaohan (八佰伴)6. As noted by Anthony Yeh, the New Town Plaza was an early test case of “comprehensive planning,” which was adopted by the Hong Kong government in 1972.7 The goal was to provide much-needed housing for the working populations in the then still rural New

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Territories. Under this arrangement, the British new town planning concepts of “self-containment” and “balanced development” were adopted, the aim being to provide employment opportunities as well as shopping, recreational and community facilities for the new residents. Although the goal of “self-containment” was never fully realized due to inadequate employment in these areas, a large contingent of the members of the working class voluntarily moved to the new towns, not least due to the attractiveness of the shopping and other modern amenities. The development of Shatin also came to represent the successful cooperation between town planners and private developers, with the latter assuming the responsibility for managing many public areas that connect the mall and other community spaces. With its central location and direct connection to major transit links, the New Town Plaza also became seen as the very heart of Shatin new town itself (FIG. 2 & 3).

While government planners often proclaim the New Town Plaza as a successful example of town planning, the developer of the mall, Sun Hung Kai Properties, refers to this development as a heroic move spearheaded by the company. The idea of building a mega mall in a newly developed urban area in the early 1980s was a huge gamble, on the account of a company representative, as the project risked failure if it was unable to bring in enough shoppers to the mall. To ensure success, the company proposed two strategies. The first was to secure the lease of a flagship department store (which it managed to do after hard negotiations with the Japanese retailer Yaohan). And the second was to build a large car park for encouraging out-of-town shoppers to come to Shatin. In the beginning, the car park proposal was repeatedly rejected by the government for the reason that it went against the fundamental objective of new town development; that is, it must first and foremost serve the interests of the local community. After many months of negotiations, the two parties finally made a compromise: Sun Hung Kai would be allowed to build an underground car park on the condition that it would also provide additional community facilities in the mall, including a bowling arena, a skating rink and billiard rooms that catered primarily for Shatin’s residents. The arrangement was seen as a “win-win” solution for all. For the government, the new provisions would ensure the comprehensiveness of new town planning without spending additional public money. At the same time, Sun Hung Kai received praise for its “ethical commitment” to doing something beneficial and meaningful for the

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8 Between 1976 and 1986, almost 80% of the growth took place in the new towns, and the number of people living there had increased by an average of about 150%. See Yeh, “Public Housing and New Town Development,” 91-92.
9 “人物專訪: 新市鎮創建里程碑: 訪問陳啟銘先生” (Interview with Mr. Chan Kai Ming), http://www.shatin.hk.
10 “人物專訪: 新市鎮創建里程碑：訪問陳啟銘先生.”
community – a move that was not usually expected from profit-making developers. And certainly for many local residents, the new facilities were welcome features that made them proud of living in Shatin.

Perhaps to the surprise of even the developer, the New Town Plaza rapidly emerged as the most popular mall in the city. Throughout the 1980s and 90s, it was the most visited shopping center not only in Hong Kong but also in the world, with an average of 150,000 visitors per day and reaching 200,000 in the weekends. While the high number was boosted by the mall being a major thoroughfare connecting different public spaces, Sun Hung Kai also invested heavily in the Plaza’s architectural design in the attempt to draw in more shoppers. These include providing attractive features in the open areas to create memorable experiences for the visiting crowds. Among the most well known was the fountain in the malls’ central lobby, the first automated fountain installed in Hong Kong (FIG.4). Another highly praised design was the spectacular atrium constructed with curved glass panels, which again was the first in the city and became a precedent for many that followed (FIG.5). According to a representative of Sun Hung Kai, all of these elements were built using the most advanced technologies and followed the most up-to-date design trends in the world. And these had been proved to be tremendously successful not only in boosting the popularity and prestige of the New Town Plaza, but also became spectacular symbols of a modernizing, flourishing commercial culture that characterized Hong Kong in the last quarter of the 20th century.

As mentioned earlier, the strong sense of community ties assumed by Shatin’s residents and their collective sentiment toward the New Town Plaza seems to have defied the familiar critique of consumerist culture for atomizing individuals from social life. But as Lui Tai-lok has noted, it is important to distinguish Hong Kong’s “malling process” from those of other places such as North America, where the development of shopping centers was closely associated with increased automobile ownership and suburbanization. The New Town Plaza and other shopping malls in the new towns were all built as an integral part of large housing estates and were promoted from the beginning as “community development.” A key focus was on providing spaces for collective activities, including shopping, recreation and other forms of entertainment, all of which being

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assumed to play significant roles in strengthening the sense of belonging amongst the new town residents. It was also in this context that mass consumption in Hong Kong became full-fledged. Indeed, Sun Hung Kai had from early on noticed the demographic change in Shatin, where a majority of the households were no longer members of the “poor working class.” Rather, after having benefited from the rapid economic growth in the 1970s and 80s, they now made up an expanding middle-income group that were motivated to consume and to improve their standards of living. The need to appeal to these people also means that consumer goods must remain affordable for the masses and cater for popular taste. The arrangement of retail spaces and design of the mall itself also closely followed this direction. The idea was to provide a modern, attractive yet highly accessible shopping environment where different members of the new town families were able to find something they desired and through which imagined a better future on their own terms.

In recalling his experience growing up in Shatin, one resident, now in his early 30s, contended that the New Town Plaza was undoubtedly an important place that defined his childhood years. The fact that the mall was connected to major public amenities, including the city hall, the public library and the large public park along Shatin’s waterfront made it not only a popular meeting point but also a central place for socializing. The resident also revealed that although he did not have much money to spend in the past, he would often linger at various places of the mall, such as the MacDonald restaurant, where he would meet up with his classmates for drinks and chats after school hours. Another favorite spot of his was the Commercial Press bookstore (商務印書館), where he had spent endless hours browsing the latest books and popular magazines. Like many others, he would also sometimes go to the mall for people watching, or simply to enjoy the air-conditioned interior during hot summer days. Indeed, similar narratives surrounding the New Town Plaza have also been told by many Shatin residents. Although it was a space of consumption geared toward profit-making, the mall was also something more to its users, who inscribed different meanings and values to the place in ways that made sense to them.

A New Mall in the New Millennium

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13 Also see Lui’s discussion on the changing demographic in the new towns, “The Malling of Hong Kong,” 39.
14 Private interview with a Shatin resident, 2013.
As with many narratives of places undergoing rapid change, these fond memories of the New Town Plaza have become more pronounced in recent years, when the management of the mall embarked on a series of expensive renovations that resulted in the loss of much of the building’s original character. The decision, which was made in the early 2000s after a prolonged economic downturn, was predicated on the need to adapt to a changing economy in which mass consumption was no longer the dominant business model. With affluence increasingly concentrating on a narrow segment of the population, it was believed that the creation of a niche market catered for the more wealthy would allow retailers and mall owners to gain more profits. While this has been a general trend in other parts of the world, the prospects of transforming Hong Kong’s shopping malls into a more upscale environment was also boosted by a rapid increase of wealthy Mainland Chinese tourists in recent years. This growth was an effect of a government scheme initiated in 2003 in the attempt to shore up the economy through tourism. Since then the scheme has ushered in hundreds of thousands of Mainland visitors. Although this influx has brought sizable revenue to businesses and the government, it also led to escalating rent and closures of many long time local shops that were unable to compete with the more well-capitalized international retail chains. The situation incited discontent from many ordinary Hong Kong citizens, who lamented that the local environment and “Hong Kong’s way of life” are under threat in an economy increasingly subsumed to the logic of the market on the one hand, and to the “invasion” of wealthy Mainland consumers on the other.

Amongst the many changes made to the New Town Plaza in the renovation, one that prompted the most criticism was the removal of the iconic Music Fountain from the mall’s central lobby. While the management saw it to be an outdated feature that no longer fit with contemporary design trends, many Shatin residents felt that the removal represented a huge loss of something that had long defined their sense of place and collective memories. Another more recent change that instigated an outcry was the relocation of the Commercial Press bookstore, which could no longer afford the high rent after the renovation (FIG.6). In view of this and the continual exodus


16 In the attempt to boost Hong Kong’s sagging economy, the government introduced the “Individual Visit Scheme” in 2003, making it easier for more Mainland Chinese tourists to visit the city.

17 This relocation of the bookstore, which occurred in late 2012, has incited great reactions from the Shatin community and heated discussions in the Chinese media. For example, see 記曉風, “「商務」結業哀新市鎮變質 沙田爆發另類光復運動,” Hong Kong Economic Journal, 15 October 2012.
of other long time retailers, a number of residents initiated a campaign, “Help New Town Plaza,” with the goal to prevent the building from further changes (FIG.7 & 8). While it remains unclear to what extent this campaign will have implications on the ongoing transformation of the mall, it has helped raised awareness of the significance of the New Town Plaza and interests in the Shatin community itself. This can be seen, for example, in the emergence of several local tours last year that took visitors to explore different parts of the town. These tours were guided by young people who grew up in the area, the so-called “Shantinites,” who were keen to promote the uniqueness of their neighborhoods, including the residential estates, popular eateries and other “local heritage” that are not well known to outsiders and even to some of the residents living here. These activities has also helped direct attention to the wider context beyond the New Town Plaza, whilst in the process enable a better understanding of the relationship between the mall and the new town.

It should be noted here that these initiatives were not isolated instants confined to one district, but part and parcel of a wider struggle of local communities against urban renewal projects across Hong Kong in recent years. As I have discussed elsewhere, these contestations were themselves closely tied to larger processes of economic and political change in the territory, particular those after the Asian financial crisis that coincided with the change of Hong Kong’s sovereignty in 1997. The slow progress in the push for democratic reform, the accelerating privatization of public assets, and increased reliance on Mainland visitors for shoring up the economy have all contributed to a growing pessimism amongst Hong Kong citizens about the territory’s urban future. At the same time, the desire to preserve “Hong Kong’s way of life” amidst ongoing integration with Mainland China have been fueling a new series of grassroots-led activities that encourage people to rediscover the city’s neighborhoods and their histories. A common emphasis running through these activities is “community ties and cohesion,” which have been widely hailed to have aided Hong Kong’s past economic success and defined the collective memories of many working class families, including a large contingent of those living in the new towns.

It is within this context that the New Town Plaza, along with other familiar places and objects of consumption, became seen as testimonies of the “success story” of Hong Kong – a story that centers on the themes of upward mobility, modernization and mass consumption. It is important,  

18 “一樓一古：沙田友苦笑, 家變,” Apple Daily, 20 February 2013. For an example of these tours, see http://cache.org.hk/word/shatin.pdf.
however, to note that while these themes remain central to many narratives about Hong Kong’s past, there has been a shift of emphasis on the roles assumed by the key actors over time. As this paper has shown, the development of the New Town Plaza has long been hailed by the government as an ingenious case of good town planning and by the developer as a heroic undertaking of private enterprise. In both of these narratives, “community development” has been repeatedly invoked to underscore the “ethical commitment” of officials and the developer to serve the interests of new town residents. Although few may challenge these claims when looking back in history, they have now, ironically, become the rationale for resistance against new forms of development in the present, whereas the government, developers and big corporations are being accused to be “colluding” with each other to maximize revenue at the expense of the welfare of ordinary citizens. And there is, indeed, no better case to illustrate these dynamics than the transformation of the New Town Plaza – the exemplar of Hong Kong’s consumerist culture and a cherished symbol of “community development.”
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Images and Captions:

FIG. 1 King Wah Centre, one of the many older shopping malls in Hong Kong that is about to be demolished to make way for a more upscale shopping center, 2013. (Source: Apple Daily)
FIG. 2 The New Town Plaza and its adjacent community facilities, Shatin. (Courtesy of Wikipedia user -Wing1990hk)
FIG. 3 The Musical Fountain, an iconic feature of the New Town Plaza (Source: House News).
FIG. 4  A perspective drawing of the New Town Plaza in 1984 showing the mall’s central atrium (Source: 新沙田月刊, 10 April 1984).
FIG. 5  A rendering of the proposed New Town Plaza in 1984. (Source: 新沙田月刊, 10 April 1984).

FIG. 6  An interior view of the New Town Plaza after the renovation. (Courtesy of Wikipedia user -Wing1990hk)
FIG. 7 A recent article that discussed the recent protests against the transformation of the New Town Plaza. (Source: Hong Kong Economic Journal)
FIG. 8 Poster of the “Help New Town Plaza” campaign, 2012. (Source: Help New Town Plaza Facebook page)