

## ARTICULATING THE COMPOSITE CITY: THE CASE OF HONG-KONG

Caroline Bos and Tris Kee

UNStudio and Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning  
University of Melbourne  
c.bos@unstudio.com, <http://www.unstudio.com>

Department of Architecture  
Faculty of Architecture  
The University of Hong Kong  
tyckee@hku.hk, <http://fac.arch.hku.hk/cpw/home/introduction/>

### Abstract

Hong Kong, with its dense verticality, public-private function mixes, and cultural mix of East and West, has long been the world model of hybrid metropolitan development. But how is this hybrid condition currently working out? In Hybrid Hong Kong Stephen Yiu-wai Chu argues that the efforts to brand Hong Kong as 'Asia's world city' have led to the loss of Hong Kong's unique hybridity, which is being replaced by a Central Business District identity in which there is little or no place for vernacular and creative cultures. This paper explores how urban planners in Hong Kong are fighting this tendency, which can also be recognized in other world capitals, using a unique hybrid model which exemplifies top-down bureaucracy meeting bottom-up initiatives to create an urban transaction between government interventions and urban entrepreneurship to foster a composite city.

**Keywords:** hybrid city, Hong Kong, discursive governance, planning

## INTRODUCTION: UNDERSTANDING THE HYBRID CITY

*'Cities, unlike villages and small towns, are plastic by nature. We mould them in our images (...) In this sense, it seems to me that living in a city is an art, and we need the vocabulary of art, or style, to describe the peculiar relation between man and material that exists in the continual creative play of urban living. The city as we imagine it, the soft city of illusion, myth, aspiration, nightmare, is as real, maybe more real, than the hard city one can locate in maps and statistics, in monographs on urban sociology and demography and architecture.'* (Raban, 1974).

In his book *Soft City*, Jonathan Raban vividly describes urban living as the skillful navigation of a territory that the navigator experiences as strange and confusing, but also as exhilarating and deeply personal. The city air, *'that faint, smoky-turquoise big city colour'*, the smells, the noise, the stop-lights, the traffic, the babble of languages around you— they are not easy to deal with, but somehow you make them your own; you make them part of your story, part of your winding road. *Soft City* is about London, but also perhaps about New York, Paris, Hong Kong, or Istanbul – any big, sprawling metropolis where the hard materials of the city, the buildings and infrastructure, to some extent give way to the soft elements, the fluid melee. The relationship between the hard and the soft city could be interpreted as a symbiotic one; the soft city flourishes in chaotic, hybrid urban assemblages.

In the forty years since the book was written, a lot has changed. As Raban wrote a few years ago: *'I stare with disbelief into estate agents' windows and feel the urge to cry – not just for the prices displayed there but for the single-class, moneyed homogeneity that has overtaken quarters once so excitingly diverse.'* (Raban, 2008). It seems that the rising prices of property have killed off the soft city as Raban knew it, even as the hard city, with its gentrified streets of multi-million pound houses, and new icons defining the skyline, prospers. Is this an unavoidable development? Is it the necessary result of a natural see-saw created by property booms and busts, mayoral policies, and massive geopolitical force shifts? Should we just accept that urban areas become more boring as they become richer? Is a hybrid condition a weak order, which is erased as the hard, quantifiable parameters of money, concrete, steel, grow in strength and prevalence? Or do we think that the hybrid city, with its edginess and creativity, represents a real value in its own right? And if we do; how can we, as urban planners and designers, as policy makers and as citizens, ensure space for the hybrid city - and where?

Another change that has taken place is that new virtual communities hack their own paths through the hard city, generating new urban encounters and experiences. Do Tinder, Grindr, Couchsurfing, Gumtree and the like, which require at least as skillful navigation as the kebab houses and launderettes of the 1970-s, provide for the individuality, tactility and versatility of today's soft city? A question we could ask in relation to this development is: how can we enlist these new urban connections to enhance the experience and diversity of the city?

### **PROPOSITION: PLANNING FOR THE HYBRID CITY**

The premise of this paper is that the aspects associated with the hybrid city that result in engaging, diverse, and lively urban experiences require first and foremost hybrid urban planning practices. The central districts of big metropolitan cities, and perhaps in particular cities which have a large financial sector, such as London and Hong Kong, are becoming less diverse. Large-scale corporate architecture, shopping malls and residential developments are transforming areas that used to be mixed into homogeneous and bland environments. Rather than letting ground prices dictate the level of diversity, we believe that urban planners should take positive action to ensure that cities remain lively, versatile and permeable to all types of urban users. One of the most important ways to achieve this is by encouraging users to activate the city, which constitutes a conscious appeal to the agency of the people who construct the hybrid city.

### **DEFINING CRITERIA: CONNOTATIONS OF THE HYBRID CITY**

What exactly do we mean by the term hybrid city? In 'Collage City' (Rowe & Koetter, 1978), the spatial definition of the hybrid city that comes to the fore exists in direct opposition to the 'total design' of the utopian Modernist urban vision. The authors perceive a need for a new urban design strategy of 'enlightened pluralism' after the 'disintegration of modernism'. Flexible design strategies such as fragmentation, bricolage, and collage are proposed. The text presents a sweeping and high-brow overview of architectural history; though impassioned, the narrative is designer-focused. The illustrations, many city plans, some Picasso's, confirm the professional high-mindedness of the text; the city appears viewed primarily from the drawing board. The severe black and white diagrams of historically significant urban configurations assemble into a distant object of study. Thus, while 'Collage City', in our view, addresses some of the most essential defining criteria of the hybrid city from the architectural point of view, namely its spatial disjunctions, its resistance to superimposed overall utopian rigidity, its postmodern celebration of difference and diversity, its relevance is limited by the absence of the user. As Henri Lefebvre has pointed out, the architectural focus on formal compositions highly abstract; the architectural drawing can even be argued to be a medium of exclusion: 'Within the spatial practice of modern society, the architect ensconces himself in his own space. He has a representation of this space, one which is bound to graphic elements – to sheets of paper, plans, elevations, perspective views of facades, modules, and son on (...) It is a medium of objects, an object in itself and a locus of the objectification of plans.' (Lefebvre, 1992).

To understand the hybrid city as purely a post-modern medley of volumes and voids, which can be conveyed in graphic and geometric terms, could be seen as a misconstruction on the part of the architect; in reality, hybrid space is 'complex, grounded in everyday life, and made and transformed by experience.' (Hill, 2006). The user, in Lefebvre's words, is 'the producer, appropriator and product of space, moving in reaction to the city and projecting bodily movements on the the city.' When Raban described the Soft City of London, he also focused on the agency of the user; the city almost manifests as a sort of computer game *avant la lettre*; an elaborate metropolitan stage set, which you,

the city dweller, create yourself by chaining together the elements that fit your story.

Following this reasoning, the hybrid city is essentially something that is produced by the people who move through it. The experiences of these urban users center on fleetingness, acceleration, and more flow-like structures (Berman, 1982). Movement and flow are the essential characteristics of the modern and post-modern experience of time and space. In the contemporary understanding of time and space, abrupt breaks have become been replaced by gradual transformations (Harvey, 1990). We encounter this fluidity at many levels: the power of nation states has become diffused over many transnational institutions, there are countless virtual and imagined communities (Anderson, 1983) meeting across temporal and spatial zones; and individuals more or less freely move around the globe building up their individualized biographies (Giddens, 1992). Flow is thus more than the sum of all our infrastructures and our hypermobile lifestyles (Castells, 1996); it is a fundamental trait of contemporary life and society. Post-modernist geographers such as Edward Soja, and Doreen Massey have written extensively about the variability, heterogeneity and fragmentation in the space and time of the contemporary urban order. Their works have shaped our understanding of the hybrid city as social space; just as they make us see that the material world is profoundly shaped by the actions of people, both as individuals and as social entities.

As a city is a complicated organism due to the inherent complexity shaped by changing social, economic and architectural forces. The common assumption that the architect's job is to design for the people is often restricted and undermined with contradictions. People have changing needs and aspirations in regard to the built environment and yet, these values often result in conflicting interests within society. The ultimate pursuit in the notion of hybrid city is to ensure a society in which the distribution of common goods and services are beneficial to all. According to Harvey, "the principle of social justice applies to the division of benefits and allocation of burdens arising out of the process of undertaking joint labor" (Harvey, 1988). The nexus of hybrid city as social spaces and spatial transformation that involve ordinary citizens may help solve contemporary urbanism specifically related to design; however, solutions to these problems are mainly controlled and regulated by higher powers and decision-making authorities.

The locus of power and decision-making has an undeniable impact on the planning and design of the city. Foucault saw the city as a "milieu or a field of intervention in which individuals, populations, and groups [...] circulate ideas, forms and technique" to solve problem-spaces (Foucault, 2007). The focus is to evaluate the distribution of benefits in the city and mechanisms applied to accomplish a socially just hybrid city depending on individual preferences and values. Harvey assumed that individual justice is on par to achieving territorial justice and he noted that several criteria must be met to achieve socially just distribution, which includes features like: inherent equality; valuation of services in terms of supply and demand; need; inherited rights; merit; contribution to common good, actual productive contribution; and efforts and sacrifices (Harvey, 1973).

## CASE STUDY HONG KONG

As Niraj Verma wrote in his book *Institutions and Planning* (2007), prevailing city planning theory that comes under the relationship of planning and institutions has long been embedded with debates and dichotomies. The vast literature on the inquiry of new institutionalism in planning is bursting into economics, political sciences and other disciplines (Verma, 2007). The traditional view is that within its top-heavy structures, planning brings together such diverse topics as efficient administration, social reform, and civic design. "Institutions such as government or market provide the framework within which planning operates" (Verma, 2007). The demands of this knowledge base produced the professionalized planning practices common today (Alexander, 1992). The current Hong Kong urban condition presents a unique hybrid model which exemplifies top-down bureaucracy meeting bottom-up initiatives to create an urban transaction between government interventions and urban entrepreneurship to foster a composite city. It can be observed that intervention from authority or bureau is most effective when there is a strong commitment to resident participation (Hall & Hickman, 2011). An interface between government and urban stakeholders where bureaucracy operates not as a blocker but as a facilitator can offer a democratic platform for local participants to become key players in design decisions that will affect them.

It is rather important to study the problems of the city than problems in the city itself. Hong Kong's top-down sovereignty has nowadays becomes less stringent with community actively involved in collaboration processes; however, the need to collaborate with key stakeholders and acknowledge their viewpoints in the design outcome remains a challenge for the bureaucratic government. To understand our hybrid city as a social attribute, the collaboration in its placemaking process can help define common concerns over shared space among key community stakeholders and can "build up social, intellectual and political capital that transformed into a new institutional asset" (Healey, 2006). This joint effort of public participation could ease future discussions by effectively providing new channels to recognize impacts and capturing the "pluralism of values and knowledge in a society where preferences have not been properly captured by the technocratic bureaucracy" (Clifford & Tewdwr-Jones, 2013). The inclusive dialogue embraced in engagement exercises could potentially shape social space by promoting "new synergetic partnerships between stakeholders with new mode of governance that acknowledges the need to involve multiple stakeholders" (Brand & Gaffikin, 2007). This partnership further produced negotiated knowledge that is co-constructed by social actors with diversified views and priorities. Here diversity is recognized as a form of social asset to celebrate differences and encourage a discursive mode of governance.

Hitherto, the collaborative approach simply assumes a unified, coherent voice but scholars (Albrechts & Denayer, 2001; Brand & Gaffikin, 2007; Healey, 2006) have noted that this is seldom realized in practice. The main difficulties come from the stringent institutional conditions where power remains with the executive politicians. The power relationships create tensions in operating collaborative practice that paradoxically "embeds values of cohesion, solidarity and inclusivity within a world that is socially fragmented" (Brand & Gaffikin, 2007). The collaboration between the Government, the

private and public sector, and other professionals in architecture and urban placemaking is now considered as a standardized practice. Public participation is highly questioned in its implications in practice as the dialogues generated are considered purely a form of governmentality (Clifford & Tewdwr-Jones, 2013). The central debate raises many questions about the effectiveness of public participation in undertaking a collaborative effort and whether there should be more of engagement exercises. Indeed, collaboration during the placemaking process would only be effective where genuine and inclusive dialogues among all stakeholders are enabled in the institutional framework to create a hybrid city.

### **Case Study Hong Kong - Focus on Kowloon East**

To demonstrate how hybrid city allows the spatial flexibility for people who move through, and the mechanism for collaborative design can be cultivated in the city's planning process, we present an example in Hong Kong Kowloon East in exemplifying the possibilities of collaborative placemaking and design process a hybrid setting. The Kowloon East area is identified as a strategic growth area in transforming into the second Central Business District in Hong Kong. The area served an important manufacturing function in Hong Kong during 1960s-1980s industrialization (Figure 1). With gradual relocation of factories to Mainland China, these factories became obsolete and have gradually transformed into non-industrial uses by local artists. Within the developed neighborhood, there is insufficient green space, poor walkability and street connectivity with frequent competition of road usage among pedestrians and road traffic. The waterfront is also not enjoyable for public usage with its previous use as loading and unloading area. To promote better land utilization within the neighborhood, the Energizing Kowloon East Office (EKEO) was set up in 2012 to steer, supervise and monitor the transformation of Kowloon East into a strategic district that supports commercial need via urban planning and design strategies (Figure 2).



Figure 1. Manufacturing Industries were the Economic Pillar in Hong Kong During the 1960s – 1980s.  
Most Factories were Located in Kowloon East



Figure 2. Energizing Kowloon East Office (EKEO) was Set Up to Activate Urban Transformation in  
Kowloon East

(Courtesy of EKEO)

Taking past economic glory of rich industrial elements from past development, this provides an important legacy and design direction to continue past successful story and respect unique local

urban identity in the process of Kowloon East transformation. The whole project aims at promoting urban branding to the entire area into a CBD2 by putting emphasis on four themes of urban regeneration, namely connectivity, diversity, design and branding. Urban connectivity focused on green transportation and pedestrian network provisions to enhance circulation between inland and waterfront areas. On the other hand, diversity brings multiple purposes in urban area through diversifying functional uses to cater day time and night time activity needs among urban dwellers for business, tourism, leisure and cultural purposes. Therefore, the architectural and urban design will include landscaping, greening and streets furniture provision to enhance urban life. More importantly, urban branding is crucial to incorporate as a placemaking element to give an overall identity for the premier Central Business District with local uniqueness on the international stage.

As the mission to embrace urban branding as the merit to solve urban crisis, EKEO engages stakeholders across different sectors to express their views and organizes events to raise public's involvement in promoting CBD2 identity (Figure 3). While confronted with complicated land use problems, innovative ideas and recognition of the urban merit can facilitate district transformation and make the best rational use of public spaces to maximize public and private sector needs. The strategy fosters a sense of partnership and develops a platform for all community actors to steer the project and move onwards through collective effort.



Figure 3. Collaborative Community Workshop for Urban Branding and Placemaking





Figure 4. Conceptual Master Plan – a Branding Vision for Energizing Kowloon East

Through a series of public participation activities and attempts to encourage broad base involvement of local community sectors, invaluable inputs offered feedback on the design direction, branding and urban development proposals. Collaborative synergy is gathered through public forums, workshops, seminars and exhibitions. Participants included residents, business parties, architects, surveyors, engineers and planners had all identified district branding as the key to establish urban identity. Some specific implementation included a conceptual Master Plan for the districts which already received multiple revisions since launched (Figure 4). Other placemaking methodologies branded open space into a pioneer Industrial Heritage Park showcasing Hong Kong's history through landscaping, encouraging public arts, artifacts having industrial characteristics or displaying physical products related to industrial businesses. The collaborative planning vision even transformed unattractive urban space underneath the flyover along the promenade into an active cultural performance venue. The notion of urban branding becomes an asset and merit in the urban regeneration from obsolete industrial precinct into attractive community leisure hub.

### Knowledge Input to the hybrid city

In De Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*, the 'everyday practice' and 'ways of operating' or 'doing things' no longer appear as merely the obscure background of social activity but are instead articulated (Udall & Holder, 2013). The public engagement in Hong Kong include focus group discussions, workshops and public forums to raise important dialogues that focus on the urban

design of the built environment. Citizens' aspirations of the district, the impact of funeral business and the economic, social and political considerations quintessential for the formation of hybridity.

To realize participation as the practices, public debates helped generate architectural schema and mitigation measures to solve the incompatible urban crisis (Figure 5). Findings from focus group research and public engagement are quite in line with aspirations and needs as discussed in public consultations. The public engagement exercise provides countless opportunities to explore sensitive issues both at the micro and macro-level. Different from typical procedures in planning, the open-ended questions provide participants a sense of ownership in the placemaking process. This helps understand in detail how district-based and place-specific problems affect the lives of ordinary citizens. The importance of a community-based approach shows the vast urban issues that require imminent solutions.



Figure 5. Fierce Debates During Participatory Planning in a Hong Kong Community Hall

In relation to participation, there is a strong trend in articulating practices to move away from discussions of levels of participating and legitimacy towards an understating of the organizing, productive and reproductive work that is done when participating in the production of the built environment is a part of ongoing process of social change (Udall & Holder, 2013). Moving from the obscure background of participation, there is a paradigm shift in motivation, skills and access to resources that make up participatory practices. To authentically and effectively improve the quality of life and built environment, hybrid city as the architectural point of view and its spatial disjunctions celebrate difference and diversity.

## CONCLUSION

The above case study only illustrates community involvement in Hong Kong's placemaking is an emerging praxis in architectural practice and pedagogy while the Government begins to provide multiple platforms for public to get involved in expressing their concerns, understanding ongoing developments and identifying development directions. Collaborative planning and design is a dialectic social learning process which takes time to mature in a hybrid city. Not only the quantity, but also the quality which the collaborative efforts have committed is meaningful in realizing genuine productive results. This learning, therefore, not only applies to bureaucratic structure in initiating changes to move away from elitism at the starting point of planning process, but also to awaken community's role in voicing their concern logically and systematically. While trying to expand design innovativeness on agreeable issues, more efforts should be played in breaching the planning and design gap among conflicting ideas. New solutions formed under mutual negotiation and idea exchange would undeniably a product of common learning process to address most peoples' concern. Though there might still be imperfections and it is a time consuming process in early stage, however, this would be a fundamental action to rebuild community's confidence towards the local government regarding its legitimacy to rule as well as to ensure that collaborative methodologies become the architectural rubric at times when concerns over planning for the Hybrid City becomes prevalent.

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## BIOGRAPHIES

**Caroline Bos** (1959) studied History of Art at Birkbeck College of the University of London, and Urban and Regional Planning at the Faculty of Geosciences, University of Utrecht. In 1988 she founded Van Berkel & Bos Architectuurbureau with the architect Ben van Berkel, extending their joint theoretical and writing projects to the practice of architecture. In 1998 Van Berkel and Bos was transformed into UNStudio; a network of specialists in architecture, urban development and infrastructure. She leads UNStudio's Urban Unit. She has taught as a guest lecturer at Princeton University, the Berlage Institute, The Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna and the Academy of Architecture in Arnhem and has been External Examiner at DRL, Architectural Association, London. Currently she is Honorary Professor at the Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning of the University of Melbourne.

**Tris Kee** is a Registered Architect in Hong Kong and an Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Architecture, The University of Hong Kong. Her interests encompass the fields of Architecture, Urban Planning, Professional Practice, Contemporary Building Construction and Community Engagement Process. She has lectured in Amsterdam, Rome, Taiwan, and Singapore on the topic of participatory approaches in architectural and design practices. She is a recipient of the '40 under 40 Architectural Design Award' in 2012 and a Green Building Award

*2012 from the Hong Kong Green Building Council. She was a curator for the 2012 Hong Kong / Shenzhen Bi-City Biennale Exhibition for Urbanism and Architecture, an invited speaker at the International Design Alliance Congress in Taiwan in 2011, a lecturer at the Workshop Architettura Venezia 2012 at the University of Venice and a keynote speaker at the Crossover Comprehensive Conference in the China Academy of Art 2012. She is also the Chief Editor Chief for the Hong Kong Institute of Architects Journal. She has published a book with Francesca Miazzo entitled WeOwnTheCity in 2014 as well.*