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Skywalking in Hong Kong: Disrupting flows in the consumerist wonderland

Abstract

Hong Kong, a global city continuously expanding vertically and multiplying the opportunities for profit generation skywards. Networks of skywalks connect this vast shopping landscape, defining a directory of consumption that constantly shifts the experience and understanding of the city. This paper explores how the 'consumerist wonderland' of Hong Kong, with its fragmented identity and glorified perception of consumption, has produced an urban, spatial situation that has seamlessly circulated the flow of consumption, yet been unintentionally subverted by a passively accepted foreign force. This surprising urban guerrilla inserts a recurring, un-commoditized event that breaks the assumption of continuous consumption. Their domestication of these skywalks dedicated to consumer spending and absolute convenience, propose an alternative form of civic engagement in the contemporary urban shopping landscape. Additionally, this paper will assist in extrapolating the parallels and reciprocity between the occupations of the elevated walkways and the urban terrain of Hong Kong.

Keywords: Hong Kong, Skywalks, Consumption, Citizenship, Public Space

1 Introduction



FIG.1. Public congregation by Foreign Domestic Helpers on a Sunday, on the Central Elevated Walkways on the Northern entrance of Hang Seng Bank Headquarters, Central, Hong Kong. Kwok, E October 2012

Shopping is an activity that is closely associated with urban experiences around the world. This act of consumption is even more intensified in global cities that bask in the glory of high-end consumer products, new technology and mega shopping precincts. Hong Kong, a global city that is a portal to the rest of the world and ever expanding Mainland China, has built a prominent reputation as a shopping paradise. Its endless streets abound with international boutiques, shopping malls and mega shopping structures that merge together to form a landscape of consumption. As the sun sets, these retail terrains blend into the skyline of a city that never blinks.

As a densely populated city with rapidly increasing land shortages, there is little space for distances between buildings. Shopping malls ascend in quick succession and intense proximity, merging boundaries and becoming a connected, consumer driven landscape- the urban shoppingscape. The amalgamation of buildings streamlines the flow of consumption, linking work, transport and leisure. This smooth circulation of

the urban terrain constantly reinforces the importance of convenience and the inescapable imperative to shop.

Developed by multiple builders over four decades, the Central Elevated Walkways is a system of skywalks that connect shopping malls via hotels, to corporate lobbies via shopping malls to transport hubs across the Central Business District of Hong Kong. Conveniently inserted along the way is a limitless landscape of shopping destinations, from high-end international conglomerates through to street vendors that seamlessly disorientates those bodies in transit. These skywalks not only act as a pathway but as a directory of consumption that carries the persistent end game of shopping. The Central Elevated Walkways is the active spatial ingredient that is merging the quality of urban life in Hong Kong with the infectious activity of shopping.

In the midst of these choreographed flows has emerged a recurring disruption, a glitch in the system of endless movement. This is the ritualized inhabitation of large parts of the skywalks every Sunday by live-in domestic maids. Known legally as 'Foreign Domestic Workers', these maids work six days a week in their employer's homes and only emerge collectively on Sundays to socialize with their peers. This injection of social occupation on the Central Elevated Walkways acts as a circuit breaker that has unintentionally detected a fault condition and interrupts continuity to protect the electrical circuit from overloading. In this situation, the charged circuit of consumption has been unconsciously disrupted by the social congregation of the live-in maids. In this way the maids reframe the narrative identity of Hong Kong as simply a consumerist wonderland.

This paper explores how the 'consumerist wonderland' of Hong Kong, with its fragmented identity and glorified perception of consumption, has produced an urban, spatial situation that has seamlessly circulated the flow of consumer goods, yet been unintentionally subverted by a foreign force that is a common but passively recognized sector of the social construct of the city. This surprising urban guerrilla inserts a recurring, un-commoditized event that breaks the assumption of continuous consumption. Their domestication of these skywalks dedicated to consumer spending and absolute convenience, propose an alternative form of civic engagement in the contemporary urban shoppingscape. Additionally, this paper attempts to extrapolate the parallels and explore the reciprocal conditions between the occupation of the elevated walkways and the ways in which to understand the urban experience of Hong Kong.

2 The City of Hong Kong



FIG. 2 Podium entrance of IFC Mall and the Central Elevated Walkways in Central, Hong Kong. Kwok, E October 2012

To understand the extent to which consumerism has become an integral part of the local culture and identity of Hong Kong, it is essential to first address the port city's shift from its colonial past to post-colonial present. With a confusing assemblage of British colonial architecture, international icons Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan and postmodern skyscrapers, Hong Kong's cultural identity has been difficult to articulate by foreigners and its citizens alike.

The discussion of Hong Kong's identity surfaced collectively by its citizens about a decade before the imminent hand-over back to the Mainland power in 1997 (Abbas 1997). There were many debates by politicians, academics and cultural theorists about the lack of collective identity as a result of its colonial past as a port city, a place for transit. Hong Kong was originally a port city, which strategically opened up trading routes between the British and other parts of Asia. The name Hong Kong, in Chinese translates to 'Fragrant Harbor', emphasizing its status as a quasi-city, not quite a

place created for settlement, not quite just a thoroughfare. This creates an embedded sense of impermanence that allows for alternative inhabitations and unprecedented co-existences. Adopting this transient position, Hong Kong citizens carry an unprecedented and fragmented identity of not being quite Chinese, with Western cultural influences and a mixed sense of Chinese nationalism (Abbas 1997).¹

In a city where politics and nationalism is not accessible and opened to all, its citizens discover other means of projecting their identity, in an attempt to satisfy the notion of belonging and community.² Hannah Arendt describes the activation of citizenship in the modern world as relying on the recovery of a common, shared world and creation of numerous spaces in which individuals can disclose their identities and establish relations and of reciprocity and solidarity (Passerin 2006). It can be speculated here that the shared ideals for absolute efficiency, convenience in technology and unrelenting competitiveness by Hong Kong citizens are projected onto spaces where reciprocity and solidarity are found (Ng 2010). Thus the practice of shopping produces a collective understanding of national identity. The endless pursuit for the best of, the most exclusive, the latest, has become so entrenched into the Hong Kong consumer's checklist that purchasing one's way into a community is the most satisfying way of connecting with one another. This results in shopping becoming the city's most popular and practiced religion. Hong Kong citizens have adopted this religion of consumption (Baggini 2005) and attracted foreigners to partake in this state of glittered living. People from all over the world travel to the city to work, play and consume, charging the energy of a truly cosmopolitan city.

¹ After the hand-over, a signed agreement was made between China and Hong Kong that the Hong Kong government shall remain independent from Mainland authority for the next fifty years. In comparison to the urgency for an established identity before the hand-over in 1997, this current agreement is triggering a new wave of pressure for Hong Kong to solidify its identity before 2047. (Ng, J. 2009, *Paradigm City: Space, Culture and Capitalism in Hong Kong*, State University of New York Press, Albany, pp 94-95.)

² Post 1997, Hong Kong's Basic Law works under the government of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region and the Constitution of the People's Republic of China, where universal suffrage is not included. Although under Basic Law Article 45 where the ultimate aim is interpreted as universal suffrage, till this date, voters in Hong Kong are an exclusively selected group of 400 members, making up the Selection Committee.

(Chan, MK 1997, *The Challenge of Hong Kong's Reintegration With China*, Hong Kong University Press, Hong Kong)

3 Shopping and the City



FIG 3. A highschool dance on the floor of the the Midtown Shopping Mall, designed by Victor Gruen in Rochester, NY, 1964. Gruen, V 1964, *The heart of our cities: the urban crisis: diagnosis and cure*, Simon and Schuster, NY

The 'consumerist wonderland' has emerged through Modernity to become the central space of public engagement. It brings together the two key aspects of post-modern life; shopping and entertainment (Chung 2002). In this state of bedazzlement, the convenient act of consumption takes on a theatrical glitter as shoppers step into a new and extraordinary existence. The 'wonderland' is therefore not only simply another space but a whole different world. To trace the meteoric rise of the shopping mall in the post-war urban environment is to note the shifting understanding of communal spaces and public entertainment.

In 1954, American architect Victor Gruen envisioned the shopping mall as a place for a social promenade in an enclosed space, where the community can come together and enjoy social activities, shopping being one of them (Hardwick 2003). The suburban sprawl of post-war America left many people physically dislocated and Gruen saw the shopping mall as defining a place that would foster collective relationships. His vision was epitomized in the event of a high school dance on the floor of the Midtown Shopping Mall, New York designed by him in 1964 (Gruen 1964). These kinds of social events commonly occurred in shopping malls, but gradually disappeared as the focus of these places shifted from community engagement to generating profit. Gruen's original catalyst for suburban community life was re-adapted and transformed from spaces intended for social engagement into merchandising opportunities.

In America the shopping mall today is understood as an isolated moment, a walled and secured zone that allows for the pleasures of consumption to be safely played

out to the full. Like the typology of the casino, this isolation serves to protect the visitor from the outside world as well as amplify its 'other worldliness'. While some, led by the example of the Mall of America, have taken on urban proportions, they all follow the same generic pattern of the regional shopping malls, a careful mixture of tenants and well placed key anchor stores. Malls are composed for specific consumer groups dependent on location, wealth and aspirations. This methodical curatorship is developed through 'tried and true' systems and collated data that has now become globalized. The Hong Kong shoppingscape varies from the shopping malls of America as consumption is intensified by the less regulated shopping-dining hours. As corporate hours are flexible to accommodate for the time differences with the rest of the world, the western standard of nine to five, Monday to Friday, is not always applicable in Hong Kong. The citizen's relentlessness to over achieve and be constantly at the fore means that working hours stop when work is absolutely completed (Ng 2009). This flexibility changes the dedicated hours of bodily functions such as eating and sleeping, and consequently the entire city's body clock adapts to this shifting condition. Opening hours of retailers are usually flexible between mid morning to midday, with closing hours extended to ten or eleven into the evening, sometimes midnight. Restaurants open till late and diners open continuously for over twelve hours, some even open for twenty-four hours. As seen in Wong Kar Wai's film *Chungking Express* in 1994, the city of Hong Kong is vivaciously alive with shops and diners opened throughout the night. This is also not an uncommon practice in other major cities in Asia, such as Tokyo, Seoul, Singapore, Shanghai and Beijing; however, the intensity is ever more heightened by the inexhaustible energy that Hong Kong exudes in such a small and densely populated terrain³.

The program of shopping in Hong Kong has shifted from dedicated purchasing to a blurred and continuous zone of leisure consumption. In this fluid interaction with consumption, the diagnostic process developed in the American mall design cannot be maintained, as the mall is no longer quarantined but part of the shifting ecology of the city. It is as if the boundaries of the shopping mall have become porous, allowing a leakage of consumption out through the openings and the exits, and into the streets and through the skywalks that connect back into other shopping centers. This pernicious outbreak has the effect of turning the city into a shopping mall, where the opportunity for consumerist seduction becomes ubiquitous. Without the external designer curating movement patterns through carefully placed anchor stores, vertical

³ Compared to the other major cities mentioned above, Hong Kong has the highest population density ratio to its landmass. (Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department 2012, Population Density, viewed 23 April 2013, <<http://www.censtatd.gov.hk/home/>>).

pathways and food outlets, it is as if the network of built skywalks are all that direct shoppers through the maze of city life in Hong Kong.

4 The Suspended Streetscape

Skywalks have been a common structure in cities all over the world from singular connections between one building to another, to multiple connections that extend an entire pedestrian street network above the ground. Dating back to 16th century Florence, the concept of the skywalk first emerged as the Vasari Corridor, an enclosed elevated walkway that was first built to ensure safe movement for the Grand Duke between his residence and the government palace. From this simple addition it became a common thoroughfare between Palazzo Vecchio and the Palazzo Pitti, a viewing platform over the Ponte Vecchio, and a gallery space. Besides pedestrian safety and convenience, many cities around the world have incorporated skywalks into their urban planning schemes with the aim of decreasing traffic congestion, vehicular pollution and for weather protection. Skywalks make sense in cities where inclement weather curtails the movement of the urban flaneur. In this scenario the argument can be made that they promote movement in the city, allowing for pedestrian transit at inclement times of the year. This explains their success in countries such as Canada and parts of Northern America. One of the world's largest skywalk networks, the +15 Walkway in Calgary, was first conceived in 1970. Post WWII Canadian architect Harold Hanen recognized the opportunity to increase pedestrian activity by designing a secure and convenient skywalk system that would play a significant role in a downtown renewal scheme (City of Calgary n.d.)⁴

Today the skywalk is generally considered negatively in urban planning for the loss of vibrant street life that generally occurs. Abdicating responsibility to the street, the skywalk ignores the difficulties of designing on the ground plane with its multiple modes of traffic and creates a false reality in the sky. In doing so it draws away the vitality of pedestrian life on the street. The situation in Hong Kong however is very

⁴ The skywalk system expands over sixteen kilometres, including fifty-nine enclosed bridges, and connects over one hundred and twenty buildings in downtown Calgary. Many of the spaces connected are corporate buildings, with a central core of shopping centres. This development received some criticism in recent years as it has been identified with decreased street life in certain sections of the city. Despite this, the city of Calgary is supporting the structure as it continues to enhance the circulation of human traffic and provide pedestrian protection from climatic conditions. With similar motivations, the Minneapolis Skyway System was built in 1962 as the largest continuous skywalk system in the world. Spreading over eighty blocks of buildings, this system created a continuous landscape of corporate and consumer activity in a climate-controlled environment.

different from the Western urban context that this attitude is based in. Hong Kong is a vertical city in the cinematic manner of *Bladerunner* (Scott 1982) or *5th Element* (Besson 1997). The paucity of land coupled with an extraordinarily dense population means that the optimisation of urban flows must multiply vertically. In other Asian megalopolises such as Tokyo, skywalks and underground tunnels proliferate in section, multiplying climatically controlled pedestrian transit routes between public transport hubs.



FIG 4. The Central Elevated Walkways over Connaught Road, Central, Hong Kong. Kwok, E October 2012

The skywalk is a space of pure transition. It is a classic example of liminal urban space, or what Marc Augé described as a ‘non-space’ as it produces nothing, it only acts as a conduit for past and future production. The term ‘liminal’ was brought into prominence by the anthropologist Victor Turner to describe the ritual state of ‘inbetween’. Derived from the term ‘threshold’ it defines moments outside the conventions of everyday existence. In spatial terms these tend toward unprogrammed environments that are open to diverse activities⁵. Augé defines non-places as temporary spaces for passage, communication and consumption; the motorways seen from car interiors, motorway restaurants/service/petrol stations, large supermarkets, duty-free shops and the passenger transit lounges of world airports (Augé 1995). So too can the skywalk be described as a space singularly dedicated to specific and linear movement rather than the particularities of program. The typology of the suspended ground plane has been the architectural system of choice for a number of post war experimental architects, resolute on developing

⁵ See Turner’s definition of liminality as a transitional event in Turner V 1967, ‘Betwixt and Between: The liminal Period in Rites de Passage’, in *The Forest of Symbols*, Cornell University Press, NY, pp 93-111.

liminal spaces in the city. Yona Friedman drew vast tracks of elevated systems across Paris, while Constant spawned them across all of Europe⁶. Constant built his vast pedestrian platforms elevated above the existing rubble of the post war European cities. These utopian boardwalks proposed an alternative, new and ludic experience of the city. The reminder of the past below served to emphasize the new world order that these spaces presented, dedicated to liminal, open ended play (Bryant 2006). The un-programmed nature of these elevated pathways were taken up on an urban scale by Cedric Price in his Fun Palace (Hughes & Sadler 2000) and later built into the fabric of the Centre George Pompidou Museum by Richard Rogers and Renzo Piano. The elevated ground plane therefore sets up an alternative set of urban flows, one not bound by the conventional constraints of the street and the modernist progress of capitalism that the street represents. Liberated from the emphasis on transportation, elevated walkways encapsulated the freedom of unprogrammed, bodily events. Paradoxically to the mechanized system of the skywalk as a conduit that transports bodies to specified places, this reframes the skywalk as a space of potential and opportunity.

5 Skywalking in Hong Kong



FIG 5. The Central Elevated Walkways over Connaught Road, Central, Hong Kong. Kwok, E October 2012

⁶ See Yona Friedman's 1958 manifesto, 'Mobile Architecture' and his subsequent project 'Spatial City', and Constant Nieuwenhuys New Babylon project, 1959-74

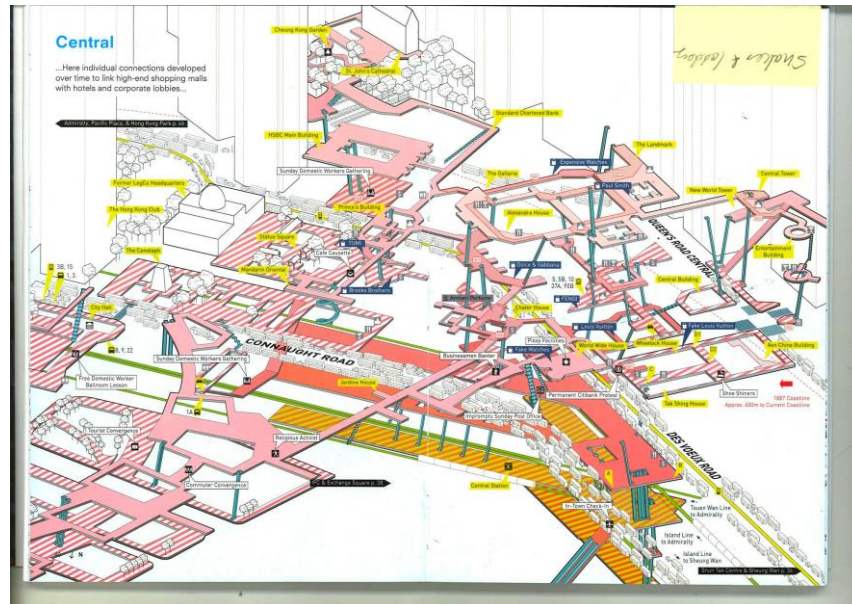


FIG 6. Diagram of the skywalks and underground networks in Central, Hong Kong. Frampton, A, Solomon, J D & Wong, C. 2012, *Cities Without Ground, A Hong Kong Guidebook*, Oro Editions, San Rafael

Skywalk systems in cities all around the world have similar intentions to continue the ground and extend the spatial opportunities for urban engagement. What is unique to the Central Elevated Walkway of Hong Kong is that it emerged from the proliferation of singular walkways by multiple parties over the last four decades. This has created an ambiguously choreographed platform for traversal across the city. To montage this system over the densely developed urban terrain of Hong Kong, with its emphasis on shopping, the Central Elevated Walkway activated an inimitable landscape of consumption.

The first skywalk appeared in Hong Kong in the 1960s, when an enclosed pedestrian footbridge was built between a luxury hotel and the second level of a shopping mall in the CBD. It was built as a connection between the two buildings but involuntarily affected the rent value within the building. In direct contrast to conventions of retail rental, suddenly, the value of the mall's second level units was more than those of the ground level. This opened a new logic of real estate value, but more significantly, sparked a phenomenon that shifted the way people moved around the city. Over the last four decades many commercial buildings were designed with the insertion of the air space connection in mind. Entrances and exits of buildings began to be added

above ground floor, hence creating a labyrinthine network between skywalks and buildings that allow pedestrian flow via many apertures simultaneously (Woo 2011). As expressed in 'Cities Without Ground', the Hong Kong skywalks are 'a result of a combination of top-down planning and bottom-up solutions, a unique collaboration between pragmatic thinking and comprehensive masterplanning, played out in three-dimensional space.' (Frampton, Solomon & Wong 2012, pp6). This unique collaboration is reflective of the alternative inhabitations that can be produced in a state of transience. The city of Hong Kong, as a densely populated portal city of transience, has obvious spatial limitations yet facilitates an urban typology that encapsulates this historically formed condition.

6 The Foreign Domestic Helper



Fig 7. The closed arcade is seen taken over by Foreign Domestic Helpers on a Sunday. This arcade is a part of the Central Elevated Walkways that connects with the Central Food Market, Central, Hong Kong. Kwok, E October 2012

In the 1970s, Hong Kong was experiencing historic economic growths that began to shift the national focus from manufacturing to service-based industries. In an effort to encourage local women to enter the work force and to lower the rising costs of labor, the colonial government sought to ease the domestic workload of the local women by sanctioning the first fleet of domestic helpers from the Philippines. This sparked the labor export business from across Southeast Asia and the demand of these domestic helpers continued to rise in the decades that followed (Carroll 2007). A two-year working visa specifically tailored for these domestic laborers was implemented by the Immigration Department, which established the role of Foreign

Domestic Helpers within Hong Kong society. On average, there are approximately 280,000 live in maids in Hong Kong every year, with more than half from the Philippines, and the remainder from Indonesia and Thailand.

With an immense population of over seven million, Hong Kong accommodates for local citizens and a multiplicity of transient foreigners.⁷ Of the 8.5% of foreigners (Immigration Department Census statistics) that make up the population of Hong Kong, more than half are Foreign Domestic Helpers who have been hired through government approved agencies from the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia. Today, these Foreign Domestic Helpers are a common and essential part of many domestic households in Hong Kong, particularly in middle class families where both parents' incomes are necessary to sustain the costs of living. The majority of Foreign Domestic Helpers are women between the ages of 19-45 who are fluent in English and Cantonese, the local language of Hong Kong. They are responsible for all domestic chores such as cooking and cleaning, as well as taking care of small children and the elderly. They live in their employer's home and work six days per week, with Sunday as the designated day of rest. These foreign live-in maids reside in Hong Kong under a two year working visa for Foreign Domestic Helpers, and are legally paid a Minimum Allowable Wage of HKD\$3,920 (approximately USD\$500) per month.⁸

Every Sunday, as it is their official day off work, the live-in maids congregate in public spaces all around the city. Large groups gather in prominent open spaces such as fountains, opened plazas, external foyers of corporate buildings, and the Central Elevated Walkways. On the walkways they mark their territory with flattened cardboard boxes and sometimes use umbrellas as their roofs. They gather in groups to converse, play games, eat and enjoy the company of other live-in maids. Collectively, their temporary territory occupies half of the walkways and transforms one of the most publicly used conduits into an exclusively social space.

What is unique in this occupation by the maids is the predictable recurrence of the event over the last few decades that accustoms the event to the city and its inhabitants.⁹ Every Sunday as the live-in maids gather in large clusters that blur into

⁷ Hong Kong has a population density ranked 4th in the world of 6516/ km² (Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department 2012, Population Density, viewed 1 May 2013, <<http://www.censtatd.gov.hk/home/>>).

⁸ Although the wages vary between different employers, the minimum amount is still considerably lower than the minimum wage of HKD\$4,800 (approximately USD\$620) for Hong Kong citizens, last amended by the Legislative Council of HKSAR (Hong Kong Special Administrative Region) in 2011 (Immigration Department 2011, Foreign Domestic Helper Wages, viewed 25 April 2013, <<http://www.immd.gov.hk/en/faq/foreign-domestic-helpers.html#wages>>).

⁹ According to the Basic Law of Hong Kong, there are no restrictions placed on the exercise of the right of peaceful assembly. For any public procession of more than thirty people, the Police Commissioner must

a landscape of loud chatter, umbrellas and cardboard boxes, no authority questions their actions and no policemen attempts to stop them. In Hong Kong, police patrols are frequent and it is common to be stopped by policemen to check the citizen's identity card if they suspect abnormal activity. The exemption of the Sunday gatherings from authorities suggests the acknowledgement of their quasi-citizenship and semi-qualified status in Hong Kong society. As they are living in the city under the two-year working visa specifically tailored for their role as a live-in maids, they are recognized as more than travellers, but their status is still of a transient nature and not accepted as equal by the citizens of Hong Kong. Interestingly, under the Hong Kong Immigration Laws, anyone who has resided in the region continuously for over seven years, has the right to apply for citizenship. Earlier this year in March, the High Court denied the eligibility of Foreign Domestic Helpers to apply for permanent residency.¹⁰ Consequently, this has confirmed the classist and racial prejudice that has underpinned the segregation of the Chinese citizens of Hong Kong and the 280,000 Foreign Domestic Helpers that live and work in the city each year.

7 Citizenship and the City

Hannah Arendt defines the practice of citizenship through its situatedness in the public sphere and its appearance in that sphere through political agency and collective identities. She stresses that one's basis of membership in a political community is irrelevant to their ethnic, religious or racial identity (Berkowitz, Katz & Keenan 2009). In relation to the public appearance of the live-in maids of Hong Kong, regardless of their ethnic or racial identity, their public presence project a collective identity that is undeniable, albeit the identity is a kind of suspended identity that struggles between the temporary and the permanent. In his work, *The State of Exception*, Giorgio Agamben describes this term as being neither external nor internal to the juridical order. He notes that it concerns a threshold or a "zone of indifference" where the internal and external do not exclude each other but rather blur with each other (Agamben 2005). The live-in maids reside in Hong Kong within this abstract "zone of

approve of it one week before the event to ensure public order and safety (Public Orders Ordinance Cap.245 1997, Public Orders Ordinance, viewed 1 May 2013, <http://www.legislation.gov.hk/blis_pdf.nsf/>).

¹⁰ The incidence that sparked this final rule was the appeal of an initial ruling from the High Court in 2011, which enabled a Foreign Domestic Helper that has worked in Hong Kong for more than seventeen years to apply for permanent residency. This ruling led to protests, with many anxious citizens projecting their frustrations at the strains that would be placed on public services. Two years later, this final ruling has rejected the Foreign Domestic Helper's right to legal citizenship.

indifference” where they are not isolated from society but are an exception to the norm. They are neither subscribed to internal acceptance (as the citizens of Hong Kong) or external criticism (foreigners). They are in a suspended state of exception. Under Hong Kong jurisdiction the live-in maids are not considered to be citizens, yet the permanency of their role is undeniable and their constant presence is deeply entrenched in Hong Kong’s society. Live-in maids are neither completely transient figures nor permanent identity card holders, rather they are quasi-citizens who exist in a realm like Agamben’s “zone of indifference”. Individually, they exist within their employer’s domestic realm six days a week, abiding by the employer’s rules. Due to racial, and classist sensitivity, they are rarely subjected to questioning by the police. However, their public congregations on Sundays, when they are liberated from their employers’ realms, are also exempted from any form of official inquiry. On Sundays, therefore, the state of exception in which live-in maids operate extends from the domestic interior into the public exterior. Buskers and promoters are a common but temporary feature of Hong Kong’s Central Elevated Walkways, but these performers generally blend in with the continuous flow of human traffic. When the live-in maids collectively occupy the skywalks on a Sunday, they transform the structures into exclusive, albeit provisional, territories. Unlike buskers and other transitory urban occupants, these live-in maids create a carefully constructed territory on the walkways every Sunday. They ceremoniously collect clean, flat cardboard boxes and place them side by side like floor mats to sit on. They sit barefooted on these cardboard mats, with their shoes neatly placed on the ground at the edge of the mat, imitating the entrance of a domestic space. The dedicated and ritualistic transformation of the walkways into these women’s exclusive social space dominates these conduits like a temporarily village.

Their appearance on these suspended streets in the sky is an interesting parallel to Agamben’s notion of the state of exception, as these skywalks are neither streets or interiors, but transit spaces that are validated only by frequent, yet transient use. No groups of citizens in Hong Kong occupy these skywalks in such a dedicated and collective fashion as the live-in maids each Sunday. They resist the laws and norms of public behavior, albeit in a peaceful fashion, and adhere to their own desires to cultivate an exclusive social space within a society that appears to exclude them. (Agamben 2005). After serving the citizens of Hong Kong for more than four decades, it seems the live-in maids Sunday ritual is their only act of freedom; an exercise in liberation and the recognition of their rights to exist as human beings. As such, their perceived state of exception in this particular situation is a direct projection of their status as an ‘exception of the norm’ within Hong Kong society and of their dislocation

in the tiers of classification of Hong Kong's citizens.

8 The Theatre of Occupation



Fig 8. Found cardboard is reused as tools of spatial delineation by the Foreign Domestic Helpers on a Sunday, on a section of the Central Elevated Walkways Central, Hong Kong. Kwok, E October 2012

The global Occupy Movement has renewed robust discussion on the politicization inherent in the occupation of public space. However the maids are not making a public protest, they are simply making space for collective engagement. In this way they are closer in action to the Spanish Bottelon movement, where young Spaniards occupy public spaces to drink and socialize. The Bottelon has also emerged by a gap in the public realm that ostracizes parts of the community who cannot afford to participate in commodified socializing. Whether or not the Bottelon gatherings morph into public protests as they have more recently done with the catastrophic rise in youth unemployment, their visibility in the public realm is a provocation to the authorities and to the wider public. Similarly in Hong Kong, it is a reminder to the city of a disenfranchised sector of the community who none-the-less have developed collective agency of their own.

In the case of the live-in maids the occupation of the public realm is not only outwardly apolitical, but inherently domestic. The central importance of the family home in Asian culture as the nexus for one's collective identity is missing for these foreign workers, who instead recreate this situation in public. The live-in maids invert the social parameters of public space by bringing the absent 'home' into the street. As mentioned previously, individual spaces are delineated by cardboard boxes that theatrically represent domestic arrangements of entrances and sitting rooms to which guests are invited. Following domestic customs of entering one's home, shoes

are left at the entrance (the edge of cardboard) and the offering of tea and food is essential. In this way the social norms of urban living are played out in these make-shift stage sets and these theatres of occupation transform the spaces of transit into a temporary, exclusively social space.

Inverting the interior into the public realm opens the doors up to the wider community as opposed to only the family. In this scenario the city takes on the space of the home and as a result this disenfranchised sector of the community suddenly view and understand the city with a different perspective. The cardboard detritus temporarily territorializes a city in which the live-in maids have no legal chance of land ownership. The cardboard sets up a modular system, which can be repeated across the spaces and is also repeatable weekly. The establishment of localized tribes is created where friends return to certain areas. Amongst the formal architecture, these young women are building networks of relationships that are practiced and developed every week. The co-existence of the social occupation and the circulation of consumption on the Central Elevated Walkways reflects not the necessity of a circuit breaker in the shoppingscape, but rather highlights the elasticity of the transit-dedicated walkways. In the process they encapsulate the fluidity of alternative inhabitations that can be produced in a state of transience, unique to the city of Hong Kong itself.

9 Conclusion

Hong Kong encapsulates the fantasy of a city dedicated to shopping. The optimization of this consuming pleasure is embedded into not only the social but also the built fabric of the city, epitomized vertically in the multiplying floating streetscapes that ease the shopper from one store to the next. While the research on the live-in maids conducted in this paper articulate a specific and unique scenario to Hong Kong, it is possible to see it as exemplifying a global urban condition that is not an exception, but an extremity: the contemporary shoppingscape. What emerges are larger questions about urban regulations in public space and the performance and possibilities of citizenship in this condition. By spatially and legally allowing the live-in maids this weekly occupation of the skywalks, Hong Kong incorporates a curious flexibility in its urban regulations, unique to the transient nature that the city has become accustomed to. It shows how elasticity may be embedded into the governance of public spaces, whereby the system allows for multiple and diverse communities to co-exist without breaking. The event each Sunday acts as circuit

break in the program of consumption, which while temporarily explosive, does not destroy the mechanism of economic flows. This ecological description of the city proposes an alternative relationship of citizenship in the public realm. Instead of reading the city as singular systems that propel development and economic growth, an elastic, agile and transformational ecology has the capacity to incorporate communities of difference in the multi-temporal and multi-spatial contemporary city. Here citizens can engage and participate in individual communities and the wider public realm. Hong Kong is far from a utopian answer to the problems facing the future city and the pervasive escalation of consumption within it. However, the live-in maids and their recurring urban ritual show that the city can still make space for different members of society. Above all, this co-existence of social inhabitation and consumption circulation demonstrates the spatial capacities of the elevated walkways as well as encapsulating an urban typology that is ultimately representative of the Asian megalopolis of Hong Kong.

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