The shifting spaces of creativity in Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the development of Hong Kong's cultural economy and its translation into urban space. On the one hand it focuses on recent economic development and planning strategies to develop a post-colonial identity based on the international cachet of attracting creative industries. On the other hand, it considers the development of grassroots initiatives that herald the potential articulation of Hong Kong as a culturally dense global city. These grassroots initiatives are analyzed from the perspective of their problematic relationship with urban space, and how urban planning both supports and hinders cultural development. The paper argues that top-down planning is in large part catalytic, yet at the same time can run counter to the development of genuine artistic expression. It stresses the importance of 'middleground' actors in facilitating the development of spaces for artistic creation, particularly in their productive interlocking with different forms of artistic expression and public policy initiatives. The middleground can be conceived of as a relational space produced by various processes, actors and structures operating at different scales between institutional actors and the interests of 'underground' creativity. The article concludes by problematizing the role of middleground actors and underlines the value of 'unpacking' the middleground in order to account for the contested and negotiated processes it embodies. Renewed attention to these processes will contribute to enhancing the development of sites of artistic expression in Hong Kong and other emergent contemporary contexts.

1. Introduction

Hong Kong is almost invariably portrayed as a 'global' city (Chiu & Lui, 2009) with all the requisite attributes of a commercial and financial hub. In the recent past, however, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) government has championed a series of cultural industry development initiatives to complement its existing advanced producer services hub (Zuser, 2014, pp. 100–102). This change coincides with the 'creative turn' in the public policies of developed countries following Florida's (2002) thesis tied to global competition among cities to attract the creative classes. Though this thesis has been widely rejected (Healy, 2002; Peck, 2005; Pratt, 2008), its legacy is still rather palpable in global urban cultural policy.

This paper focuses on the creative spaces in contemporary Hong Kong that constitute the 'middleground' and how these spaces embody conflicting visions of urban space. The shifting landscape of emerging and disappearing artistic spaces heralds the coexistence of different paradigms relating to space and culture in Hong Kong. These conflicting perspectives shed light onto how urban space is continually formulated, appropriated, and re-appropriated by actors whose objectives may be simultaneously aligned through visions for arts-led development, yet misaligned by market-driven logics and the concomitant imperatives of top-down approaches to planning.

Hong Kong is a challenging environment for universalizing policy approaches, owing to its geographical and infrastructural characteristics, its economic and planning model, and its dynamic and resilient creative class. Leong (2013) has highlighted the development of local cultures in 'post-colonial' Hong Kong, contrasting the development of massive infrastructural projects to the challenge of sustaining a local culture (Leong, 2013, p. 30). There seem to be at least two conflicting objectives between ambitious government-led infrastructural projects geared toward a form of cultural tourism, and initiatives from artistic communities and grassroots cultural organizations whose first concern is the survival of their artistic practices, and consequently the survival of diverse forms of artistic expressions. Between these strata, layers of diverse categories of actors – individual philanthropists, university-related structures, and private companies – also carve oases of creativity.

This analysis focuses on the evolution of a series of sites that have developed through the convergence of the territory's top-down planning and bottom-up movements, homing in on the apparent successes of middleground institutions which allow creativity to emerge organically yet providing the requisite framework to function within Hong

Kong's top-down planning system. It specifically analyses how negotiation and contestation between all these actors construct a certain type of middleground artistic spaces within a creative city. In doing so it addresses a knowledge gap related to the production of creative spaces in Hong Kong by analyzing how grassroots initiatives are contributing to the development of sites for creative expression.

2. Conceptual framework: creativity, institutions and spaces

The 'creative turn' in urban development has been the subject to a vast range of scholarly critique (Edensor, Leslie, Millington, & Rantisi, 2009; Landry, 2000). As Scott contends, "creativity is a concept whose time has come in economic and urban geography" (02014, p. 566). This concept has guided economic development policies internationally and influenced planning strategies in different locations mainly North America but also Europe in the last decade or so (Darchen, 2013). The 'creative city' concept is a translation of the concept of creativity into urban policies aimed at creating urban environments conducive to innovation and creativity.

Although the concept of a 'creative' city is not new, it received renewed attention in 2000 with the publication of Charles Landry's 'The Creative City'. This paradigm is linked to the creative class concept in economic development (Florida, 2002), which is an extension of the human capital model that predicts economic growth according to the concentration of the educated population in metropolitan area (Glaeser & Saiz, 2004). Florida's (2003) theory of human capital suggests an alternative measure of human capital based on professional occupations; artists are part of the super-creative core that 'produce[s] new forms of designs that are transferable and useful' (Florida, 2003, p. 8). Florida argues that, in times of intensifying international competition and rapid technological changes, states should strive to attract the 'creative class' to boost their economy and gain competitive advantage over those states that fail to do so. The virtuous cycle relies on the cities' ability to attract the international, cosmopolitan creative class by fostering a creative-friendly environment.

Pratt (2008, 2011), for example, has criticized the 'creative turn' for promoting a superficial, marketing-oriented conception of culture and for exacerbating social inequality between a small category of 'creative' workers and the rest of the population. As Scott suggests, at a global level, public policies enacting a model of the 'creative city' fail to grasp that 'the interdependent processes of learning, creativity and innovation are situated within concrete fields of social relationships' (2014, p. 565), and this might come at a heavy social cost and disappointment (*id*. p. 566). Most critical perhaps has been Peck (2012), who has demonstrated that the policies promoted by this thesis needed to be 'domesticated' (Peck, 2012, p. 466) in their 'adaptation' depending on the local conditions, arguing that creativity is often a proxy for government spending rather than endogenous growth as such.

Despite the criticism it has sparked and the late mea culpa by Florida himself (2017), the concept of 'creative city' still finds a sympathetic ear among policymakers, notably because it enables to 'rebadge' or 'reframe' policies in positive terms (Peck, 2012). For cities such as Hong Kong, which need to rethink their development model in a highly competitive environment, creativity and innovation seem to be the most promising avenue for sustainable growth.

The widespread momentum in creativity in cities has left a need for new understandings of how its various components come to be. Creativity and innovation in cities are products of social relationships; those relationships might emerge spontaneously and are often a product of a specific cultural, political and societal context (Scott, 2014). Notwithstanding, 'creativity' is a very ambiguous term and new theoretical approaches are needed to understand why and how particular processes emerge in specific locations.

A recent focus on institutional contexts is critical to understanding creative urbanism. In particular the rigidity of top-down mechanisms has been often rejected, as demonstrated by the failure of creative policies enforced in Osaka City in the 2000s (Sasaki, 2010). Yet the needs or intentions of grassroots or local bottom-up actors are often misunderstood at the institutional level, or blatantly ignored in policy discourses. Contrary to the ethic of general well-being on which modernist cities were predicated, the creative city is 'often a socially divisive city, in which culture as the arts is privileged over culture as the articulation of shared values in everyday life' (Miles, 2013, p. 123).

Beginning in the 1970s, several ethnographic studies theorized the key role of subcultures (Hebdige, 1979) and amateur communities in the cultural production of cities, as well as their articulation to larger structures. In her landmark ethnography of amateur musicians in Milton Keynes, Finnegan (2007) observed that the grassroots organizations of amateur musicians are sustained by a certain number of transversal institutions (churches, pubs), leading her to reject the use of the popular concept of 'art world' (Becker, 1982) because the implied notions of "coherence, concreteness, stability, comprehensiveness and autonomy" are nowhere to be seen in the grassroots organizations of amateur musician in Milton Keynes (Finnegan, 2007, p. 190).

Similarly, Charrieras' study of the trajectories of new media artists in Montreal in the 2000s shows the complex entanglements of new media art practices between different places, private apartments, artist-run centers, creative industries and cultural institutions supported by the affirmative policy of the city in favor of new media arts (Charrieras, 2010). These researches highlight the importance to consider the productive (or counterproductive) interlocked processes existing between local artists, mid-range organizations and cultural institutions supported by the government, these links being essential to the sustainability of these grassroots initiatives (Kong, 2012; Zuser, 2014, pp. 88–94).

Aptly, Cohendet et al. introduce "the dynamic role of the middleground" (2010, p. 92) as a key process in the development of the creative city. 'Middleground' institutions often codify new knowledge coming from the underground to make creative material economically viable. In such a context, Cohendet, Grandadam, and Simon (2011) underline the key role of a middleground:

Where the work of collectives and communities enables the necessary knowledge transmission that precedes innovation': […] these communities of the middleground are not only sources of inspiration for both the upperground and the underground, they also are repositories of cognitive material from which existing knowledge can be internalized and/or externalized (Cohendet et al., 2011, p. 157).

The middleground is heterogeneous, composed of different actors with different agendas and goals; it is a place of contestation and negotiation. We need a proper conceptualization of space to give an account of the complex processes through which artistic spaces come into existence in a city like Hong Kong and how they evolve. Therefore, we propose to problematize this concept by injecting a 'Harveyan' conception of the middleground as relational spaces, or as 'sites of processes' (Harvey, 1973). This approach will eventually help understand under what circumstances the middleground can successfully serve its purposes, or the processes that undermine its role.

In his seminal publication Social Justice and the City (1973), David Harvey proposes a three-dimensional view of space. An absolute space is the space according to its objective, immovable physical properties as well as pre-existing regimes and conventions (e.g. the city of cadastral mappings, private property vs. public spaces); it is a 'space of individuation' which 'applies to all discrete and bounded phenomena' (Harvey, 2004, p. 2). A relative space is space considered as 'a relationship *between* an object which exists only because objects exist and relate to each other' (Harvey, 1973, p. 13, emphasis in original). The relationship is brought to the fore by the observer's reference frame. Therefore, the space of transportation could be represented in 'different maps of relative locations' depending on whether the reference is 'cost, time [or] modal split (Harvey, 2004, p. 4). A relational space is another form of relative space which is constituted by its underlying processes. In Harvey's words, 'an object can be said to exist only insofar as it

contains and represents within itself relationships to other objects' (Harvey, 1973, p.13). A house as a relational space can be understood in terms of 'its relationality to global property markets, changing interest rates, climatic change, the sense of what is or is not a historic building, and its significance as a place of personal and collective memories, sentimental attachments, and the like' (Harvey, 2004, p. 6). The concept of relational space captures the dynamic interplay of intersubjective understandings, collective representations and material flows. Drawing on Leibniz's relational philosophy and Whitehead's process philosophy, Harvey uses the concept of relational space to emphasize the social construction of space – "[e]ach form of social activity defines its own space" (Harvey, 1973, p. 30) – the coexistence of different spatio-temporalities defined by processes, as well as the dynamism and changeability of space. Constructed by a combination of processes in tension, the relational space emerges, changes, shifts.

Following this theoretical frame, artistic and creative spaces in Hong Kong must be approached only in relation to the "process of local property construction in the global property markets, including financing the economy, participating in history and heritage of the city, and its meaning as a place traversed by personal and collective sentiments and memories, among other aspects" (Dos Santos Junior, 2014). The middleground in Hong Kong has been constructed and transformed by processes involving various individuals and groups (artists, government, real estate developers, etc.). So far, this tension has produced shifts in the categories (gentrification embodied by an increasing number of art galleries etc.), in the built environment (new high profile government initiatives, redevelopment of existing buildings), in the adaptive strategies of the underground-initiated spaces (reluctant nomadism). Furthermore, this process is continuous, and constantly renegotiated. The spaces of the middleground are not defined once and for all: instead, the relational space of middleground is constantly shifting.

Harvey's framework can be applied at different scales. For example, at the level of the city of Hong Kong, space may be characterized by scarcity and verticality, or by the natural separation between Hong Kong Island and the Kowloon side. As a relational space, Hong Kong is situated in a region in transition, with increasing infrastructures connecting it to fast-changing Mainland China and its megalopoli such as Shanghai and Shenzhen. If we come down to level of artistic spaces, given the scarcity of land, Hong Kong's 'middleground' could be best described as vertical: a great number of experimental artistic venues are sited in the upper floors of industrial building. Spatial relations may be characterized by public land ownership, private-owned development projects, and grassroots occupation of industrial buildings, or by the relative distance of certain creative spaces from business districts. The relational space of the middleground is defined by the processes that bring it into being and influence its existence: gentrification, flows of increasing/decreasing number of artists and creative workers, government planning, etc. These processes convey different conceptions, priorities and conceptions of space. For some government officials, the artistic spaces situated in industrial buildings are potentially risky spaces with safety issues. For companies, these industrial spaces can represent an opportunity for profit. For artists and some other governmental officials (HKADC), these spaces can serve as a playground for the development of Hong Kong artistic expression and cultural vitality.

The analysis that follows unpacks the notion of *middleground-as-relational-space* to shed light on how Hong Kong and other cities with similar bureaucratic frameworks might facilitate the articulation of grassroots movements, mid-range organizations and larger institutions, a condition for the creation of appropriate spaces where creative activities can flourish.

3. Methods and data

The collection of data was based on grey literature on artistic spaces in Hong Kong and on papers from major news sources. The authors also performed semi-structured interviews in 2016 with 22 key actors from several organizations from the Hong Kong middleground, as well as ethnographic research during numerous events organized by several artistic organizations over the last three years (Videotage, Soundpocket, Focal Fair, Noise to Signal series, The Empty Gallery, Whitenoise record, Spring Workshop, Floating Spaces, 'Fotanian'). The semi-structured interviews were primarily focused on the sustainability of artistic practices in Hong Kong in relation to larger cultural institutions such as museums, universities, and cultural complexes.

The identification and understanding of newly created spaces for creative industries is also based on three consecutive field trips in between 2014 and 2016. These include guided field visits to 'creative' spaces in Wan Chai, Central, and Mid-Levels led by local authorities and experts; visits with the Urban Renewal Authority to Kwun Tong redevelopment sites; visits with local planners to Kowloon East CBD2; visits to the former Sham Shui Po Magistrate's Court (adaptively reused as a university of the arts); and frequent exchanges with local academics.

4. Hong Kong and the 'creative turn'

Whether approached from a demographic, spatial, economic, political, social, or cultural lens, the development of HKSAR has been emblematic of both the impact of globalization on cities as well as China's steady integration with broader world systems (Cullinane & Cullinane, 2003). 'Hong Kong' refers to both the city that emerged from the former British colony comprising Victoria, Kowloon, and the New Territories, and to HKSAR, which is one of two such territories (along with Macau) allied to Mainland China. Hong Kong was a global leader in manufacturing from the 1950s until the 1980s, when the 'opening up' of the mainland shifted heavy industry across the border, and the handover from British to Chinese jurisdiction loomed on the horizon, which took place in 1997.

To diversify from the producer services economy that led growth over the past two decades, the creative sector has been developed through a focus on cultural industries. A cautious embrace of the 'creative turn' became obvious in 2003 when the Central policy unit commissioned a baseline study on local creative industries, and the following year, when the Home Affairs Bureau commissioned its own study on Hong Kong Creative Index. Since then, HKSAR has developed a strategy toward maximizing the economic value of the cultural and creative industries (CCI), by increasing both its human capital (both home-grown and foreign), and its production system relations (for example, by encouraging creative clusters) (Leslie & Rantisi, 2012). Though Hong Kong is a cosmopolitan and diverse city, it is very rarely recognized for its cultural assets; rather the global city *leitmotif* conjures up the placeless veneer of 'global' spaces. The city's architectural heritage, for example, has been poorly conserved over time, with newness and economic rationale only recently giving way to landscape and cultural identity considerations (Cheung, 2016).

As Fung and Erni note, in 'the course of development, the state interests and the authorities' local (e.g. district) interest are often prioritized over the culture or the local interest (Fung and Erni, 2013, p. 644). This prompted a reaction from citizens took to the streets to prevent the destruction of historical sites such as the Star Ferry Pier and the Queen's Pier in the 2000s; during these demonstrations, Hong Kong artists were active, incorporating art into social protests (Cartier, 2010, p. 38). Even though these protests did not prove successful, they have contributed to later strategies by the government to support heritage preservation by promoting the commercial reuse of historic sites, in partnership with private companies. Therefore, there has recently been a consensus on the relevance of retaining Hong Kong's hallmarks of cultural identity.

Thus, from the framework of a 'global' Hong Kong, a new quest for identity has emerged from diverse political and artistic grassroots movements. This is scaffolded upon the broader argument that creative

industries have increased in significance for the overall Hong Kong economy. This perspective is informed by both economic realities, which indicate an ever-evolving role for Hong Kong in mediating flows of various types, as well as policies that directly reinforce this position.

A series of top-down infrastructural projects have aimed at economic diversification by developing Hong Kong's innovation and creative capacities and to promote Hong Kong as a 'creative city'. Recently, cultural and creative industries have increased in significance, growing from 3.8% (2005) to 5% of the GDP (2014) (Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department, 2016). The RCCS Annual Review +[1] as part of the future West Kowloon Cultural District, and the Art Basel Fair bear witness of the growing importance of the city in the international art market. Furthermore, the HKSAR government has subsidized the educational sector to nurture the evolution of a creative economy geared toward innovation and to better tackle the coming challenges of the information economy. Several postsecondary institutions have started offering curricula dedicated to the teaching of New Media Arts and design, which encompass a range of creative practices at the juncture of arts, industrial innovation and economic development. In the field of cultural production, even though all spheres benefit from government funding, there has been a focus on design industries, digital entertainment, and film. The innovative power of these creative industries is even more valued for their transferability to other economic spheres (finance, manufacture, education, etc.), through the recommendation to regroup them with other industries into synergetic clusters (Center for Cultural Policy Research, 2003, pp. 17–19). The creative turn has thus catalyzed change in Hong Kong's economic composition toward the goal of diversification.

At the same time, some recent grassroots movements have introduced an identity in which cultural vitality has in fact added a new dimension to the city's developmental trajectory. The emergence of a post-colonial, local identity is articulated through the growing recognition of a cluster of underground creative processes in the settings of former, repurposed industrial buildings. The availability of affordable ex-industrial spaces able to host music venues, galleries, and artists' studios is a key factor in the development of a rich 'middleground' scene, as per research about the artistic burgeoning of other cities like Montreal and Berlin (Colomb, 2012). Thus, this bottom-up activity is complementary to the top-down planning models in HKSAR, even though, in practice, the complementarity is not acknowledged nor fully concretized.

5. Planning for creative spaces

Despite its colonial past, Hong Kong planning and land use systems are different from those of British cities (Chiu, 2007). The Hong Kong government is the landlord of all land and the only supplier of new land: 'planning tools are less significant than land supply policy in regulating housing prices in the private market' (Chiu, 2007, p. 64), and despite the laissez-faire orientation of the city at large, the government plays a highly interventionist role in the local housing market. To emphasize the very centralized nature of the Hong Kong planning system, Ng, Cook, and Chui (2001) have used the term 'urban planning without local governance' to emphasize that grassroots movements have had little impact on planning decisions so far and more generally that public involvement in planning processes has never been a priority.

In terms of mainstream regeneration, the HKSAR government has actively promoted new forms of development. Although for years the planning system was geared to create order from apparent chaos, more recently there has been a focus on 'soft infrastructures' alongside the very technical aspects of town planning. Urban regeneration has been a recent focus, incorporating the cultural *milieu*, historical preservation and social mix alongside the quest for new building stock. Hong Kong's

planning system has experience in bottom-up planning processes, but according to Ng et al. 'it has put Hong Kong in a disadvantaged position in terms of resolving challenging multidimensional restructuring problems' (2001, p. 172). Since 2000s, there have been more bottom-up processes leading to the reconsideration of government's planning decisions (e.g., central harbor reclamation) which indicate that the Hong Kong planning system is in a transition phase (Ng, 2008).

The largest of Hong Kong's infrastructural project with a strong cultural focus is the West Kowloon Cultural District (WKCD) situated on a newly reclaimed site. According to Raco and Gilliam (2012) the idea was to develop a large-scale cultural industries center, led by the Hong Kong Tourist Association (HKTA). The concept emerged just 2 years after Hong Kong gained independence from British colonial rule, and this large-scale cultural strategy was devised to "create a new post-colonial identity and a globally competitive city image" (Raco & Gilliam, 2012, p. 1432). It created the West Kowloon Cultural District Authority (WKCDA) in 2008 – along with a US $2.8 billion budget – to manage the construction process.

Smaller scale government initiatives toward creative spaces applying 'adaptive re-use' are also contributing to regeneration efforts. In theory, adaptive re-use has the potential to lead to a sustainable approach to redevelopment, but as Yung, Langston, and Chan (2014) point out, it frequently causes displacement and related issues. 'Comix' is the first adaptive re-use project led by the URA. It comprises renovated shophouses on Burrow Street (Fig. 1), which have been transformed into an exhibition center for comics and animation artists.

Since its refurbishment in 2013, 20 flats have been renovated to provide space for creative enterprises (Discover Hong Kong, 2016). Another highly publicized case of adaptive re-use promoting creative industries is PMQ—a former dormitory building for married police officers and their families, transformed by the Development Bureau (a Government agency created in 2009 and responsible for renewal and heritage conservation) in 2010 after it was listed under the 'conserving central' strategy. Located just off the Hollywood Road precinct on Hong Kong Island, its architecture is typical of the post-war period with its airy yet austere Bauhaus modernist style. PMQ mixes studio, commercial and entertainment places amenable to diverse forms of cultural consumptions (Fig. 2).

Though Comix and PMQ stand out as exemplary of top-down 'creativity' initiatives, others combine formal policy channels with underground development. An example is the transformation of a former slaughterhouse into Cattle Depot artist studios, which provided for a relocating space for the former occupants of defunct Oi! Street Artist Village. Funding from the government-supported Arts Development Council (ADC) has contributed to the vitality of the creative sector, both underground and middleground. Videotage (housed in Cattle Depot) and Floating Projects are vibrant examples of the dynamism and *avant-garde* character of the Hong Kong creativity. Founded in 1986, Videotage is one of the oldest institutions dedicated to experimental video and new media art in Hong Kong. Housed in the Cattle Depot Artist Village in To Kwa Wan on the eastern shore of Kowloon peninsula, the artist-run center promotes New Media Arts as a Cultural Movement by organizing exhibitions, workshops, performances, residency and cultural exchange programs spanning video art, sound art and new media art.[2] The organization is linked to the local underground scene but also supports residencies of international video and new media artists. On the other hand, Floating Projects is a site of experimentation and production in interdisciplinary arts located in Aberdeen. Labeled by Timeout magazine as among 'the best new independent art spaces in Hong Kong' (Timeout Hong Kong, 2016), it also serves as a space of socialization for artists, a meeting point for creative people from different horizons and different generations, therefore serving as a launching pad for new artists, as an incubator of ideas,

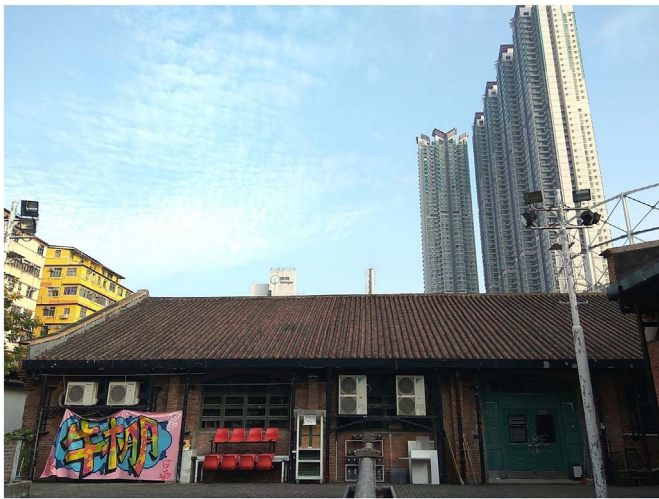**Fig. 1.** Comix Home Base, located in the Green House in Wanchai.

Fig. 2. Videotage, located in Cattle Depot Artist Village.

projects, and practices.

As spaces are leased by the government, tenants are expected to comply with certain restrictions, vis-à-vis funding (via the Arts Development Council), regulation ('industrial' vs. 'commercial' buildings) or redevelopment policies (affecting the availability and cost of middleground spaces). Furthermore, despite receiving public funding, these spaces are threatened by gentrification, which is stimulated by redevelopment projects. When the government launched its first redevelopment project in 2009–2010, the big companies that managed to apply to the scheme eventually passed on the cost of redevelopment works to the tenants. Adding to this cost repercussion, short-term speculation has also driven property values and rents up in revitalized neighborhoods. As Xian & Chen show, due to anticipations of price increases (Xian & Chen, 2015, p.302), this eventually hampered the full development of government plans. As rents have been increasing steadily in the traditional center of Hong Kong (Island), the government has been looking to develop business districts in Kowloon East for example, by increasing the space for commercial activities (Yau, 2015). Thus the face of the creative sector on the Kowloon side of Hong Kong is changing rapidly, partly under the guise of government planning, and partly owing to unintended consequences of such planning, notably the role of private developers (Fig. 3).

6. Creative spaces from below and conflicting conception of space

The rapid development of infrastructural projects and top down organization to promote Hong Kong as 'creative city' is paralleled by the development of grassroots initiatives based on a network of organizers and artists who aim to develop the *avant-garde* and experimental scenes in Hong Kong, parallel to analogous foreign experimental scenes.

6.1. Fo Tan and Kwun Tong as relational spaces for artistic expression

As mentioned above, deindustrialization left a great number of industrial spaces quasi-vacant. These industrial buildings were built in the 1950s during the growth of Hong Kong textile and other industries. In the 1980s, most of these factories were relocated to Mainland China and other Southeast Asian countries (Chan, Cheung, & Wong, 2015, p. 184). Artists repurposed vacant units in Fo Tan, Kwun Tong or Chai Wan as an alternative space for their development of arts and cultural activities' (Policy 21 Ltd. & Centre for Culture and Development, 2010, p. 31). These spaces represented the best possible option in terms of affordability, accessibility and 'synergistic effect'.

Fo Tan Arts Studio, a cluster of more than 200 artists, is an example of such repurposing of industrial units into spaces rented by young artists (Nicol, 2014). It is located north of the Kowloon peninsula apart from the main centers of Hong Kong and some 'fotanians' (artists whose studio is in Fo Tan industrial zone) point to the hardships associated with the day-to-day struggle in establishing an independent artistic practice in (the spatial and cultural margins of) Hong Kong (Art Radar, 2010). Lam and Tavecchia (2013) consider Fo Tan as an example of 'civic space' since '[it] provide[s] a free platform for citizens, including artists, visitors, and all other people to participate in their work' (p.137). Contrasting Fo Tan with the public-funded Cattle Depot, Kong, Ching, and Chou (2015) show that the cultural sustainability of grassroots appropriation of space relies on several factors such as their shared sense of community and their insertion in and contribution to the vitality of their neighborhoods. The sense of community does not equate with closed boundaries, even though it certainly defines insiders and outsiders. 'Fotanians' also exhibit their works outside Fo Tan, in the most renowned outlets in the city – and overseas - and therefore contribute to the vibrancy of the artistic scene at large. In fact, the freedom to move 'organically' in and out of the physical space of Fo Tan was part of its attraction for artists. But the feeling of belonging, as well as the certainty of having a community of like-minded practitioners to fall back on certainly made Fo Tan a particular relational space. Some of our interviewees are particularly aware of their duties toward the community of artists and stressed the importance of using their middleground structures to 'nurture' artists. Some actors such as the Blue Lotus Gallery and its director, Sarah Greene, played such supportive role: the gallery was dedicated to the promotion of Hong Kong-based photography, and Sarah Greene acted as an unofficial marketing advisor to artists. The gallery left Fo Tan in 2012 and has relocated in Chai Wan.

Beyond the 'primary' community of artists, these grassroots initiatives also contribute to the development of their neighborhoods. In fact, as Hoi-San Mak (2014) narrates in her ode to Kwun Tong studios and people, these spaces perform social and economic roles by revitalizing their neighborhoods and interacting with local communities. Kwun Tong attracted diverse trades, eateries… an elderly woman who earned her living by recycling cardboards. The feeling of loss therefore relates to this whole fragile ecosystem, which sustained and was sustained by the relational space of artistic expression, and echoes a larger sense of impermanence of Hong Kong's absolute space. The neighborhood of the former Kwun Tong artist village is giving way to a multibillion Hong Kong dollar project consisting of residential, commercial and public spaces. This process documented on the collaborative website 'A Map of Our Own: Kwun Tong Culture and Histories' initiated by Anson Mak, a digital and artistic repository of collective memories of the lived spaces of Kwun Tong artistic village and its neighborhood. These places are the target of a rampant gentrification and redevelopment projects promoted by the government citing various reasons: another 'cultural project' in the case of Kwun Tong (Mak, 2014), safety reasons as in the case of Kwai Chung (Zhao, 2017), or illegal appropriation of public (outside) space in the case of Oi! Street Artist Village.

Data Source: Natural Earth, OpenStreetMap

Map Design: Carolyn Fish

Fig. 3. Map of 'creative spaces' in Hong Kong, Kowloon, and the New Territories.

The recent closure of the indie venue, Hidden Agenda, which was located in an industrial building in Kwun Tong, after it came under increasing administrative scrutiny over licensing issues exemplifies the tensions of various processes at play in the middleground. In this sense, the regulations on land and property use constitute a significant element of the relational space of the creative spaces. They affect in very practical ways the relational space of the middleground: they frame the physical limitations of artistic expression and determine the nature and locations of such spaces.

6.2. Other actors: private companies, individuals and universities

The role of private companies has been ambiguous. On the one hand, they have contributed to the rent hikes that made certain spaces unaffordable for artists. On the other hand, they have also played some positive role in the creation of middleground structures. For example, the ArtSpace results from a partnership between the ADC and Hip Shing Hong Co., which leases the space at below-the-market rates. In Wan Chai, an anonymous property owner has leased the Fu Tak building to artists and art groups at cheaper rates as well and left the management of the units to May Fung, a local media artist (HKADC, 2010, p. 45).

The government has also implicitly supported artistic development through support for universities offering 'creative' degree programs. Some of these links are organic and have nurtured the grassroots initiatives mentioned above: the relations between Fo Tan and the graduates of the Fine Arts Department of Chinese University of Hong Kong, or between Chai Wan artist village and the graduates of Hong Kong Arts School exemplify this aspect. Floating Projects was initiated by Linda Lai, an interdisciplinary artist and faculty member of the City University of Hong Kong. It is enlivened by City University graduates and faculty (although not exclusively). Universities have also participated institutionally to the specific places such as the Jockey Club Creative Arts Centre (JCCAC), which is managed by the Hong Kong Arts Centre, a subsidiary of the Hong Kong Baptist University (JCCAC Annual Report, 2016). Universities are also directly involved in the middleground by organizing or taking part in the organization of artistic events, exhibitions and projects. The middleground sites as relational space are not only sustained by the artists geographically and intellectually opposing an external commercial order; the middleground as relational space is sustained by different processes at varying scales (personal and collective sentiments and memory, presence of postsecondary institutions dedicated to creativity, large-scale planning of creative space).

6.3. Shifting middleground, reluctant nomads

Absolute space is scarce and scarcity fuels competition. Pressured to adapt or perish, some underground and middleground actors have disappeared. An example is the former 'Oi! Street Artist Village, which was the first semi-structured mixed-mode artist village bringing together artists, architects and other creative workers (HKADC, 2010), while others have striven to find evermore creative ways to survive. In the case of Fo Tan studios, survival has been synonymous with successful 'branding', notably thanks to its yearly 'Open Studios' event sponsored by the Sino Group, which is quite active in arts sponsorship. However, this brought about a shift in the identities of the 'Fotanians': some of the first movers were chased away by rent hikes, replaced by new categories of occupants (galleries, designers, artists attracted by the 'Fo Tan' brand) (Kong et al., 2015). Once considered as a quasi-natural space of exploration and socialization for newly graduated artists – especially from the Chinese University of Hong Kong – Fo Tan has attracted the attention of mainstream art market: during Art Basel Hong Kong, visitors can now take part in the 'Art Basel VIP Fo Tan Studios Guided Tour'. In this case, gentrification and the resulting changing faces of Fo Tan studios have shortened the relative distance between mainstream art market and grassroots initiatives, while further fixing the 'Fotanian' identity in collective representations. As a relational space, the Fo Tan that used to be still lingers and nourishes the collective representations of the current Fo Tan, which has changed under the pressure of real estate market and government-induced revitalization plans. These processes combine to produce the current, yet evolving middleground Fo Tan.

For most actors, adopting a flexible, nomadic approach to space is vital. The successive locations of Videotage, Soundpocket - a grassroots organization dedicated to site specific sound art performances - or of the Noise to Signal series of noise music concerts, exemplify this nomadic trend. Videotage was first located in the former Government Supplies Department Headquarters in Oil Street in the North Point area of Hong Kong Island, then moved into various industrial buildings around the defunct Kai Tak airport before reaching its current location in a former slaughterhouse 'Cattle Depot Artist Village' in To Kwa Wan. An upcoming upscale redevelopment project around Kowloon Bay (touted to become 'Hong Kong's CBD2') is located nearby the current location of Videotage and Soundpocket. The 'Voices/Landscapes' (for the eye and ear) artistic performance/installation (Ho, 2015) displayed a sound art installation on the Kwun Tong Ferry Pier, facing the Kowloon Bay and its future redevelopment project. It can be read as an ode to a 'charming' but dilapidated soon-to-be-destroyed public space.

These middleground organizations constitute relational spaces enduring through the place-bound memories of its participants; they endure artistically in the interstices of more established genres and geographically in the temporary occupation of colonization of more established venues. The porosity of these middleground spaces exists through temporary investment in venues and the temporary gathering of people, owing to the transversal processes that maintain their existence and tangibility.

7. Conclusion

"What is interesting to retain from this discussion is that human practice is producing, appropriating and assigning new meanings to urban common spaces." (Dos Santos Junior, 2014, p.149).

The fact that the cultural economy has been advanced through both top-down and bottom-up planning processes warrants further attention into the merits of each. Top-down attempts have been strongly criticized (Kong, 2007), as planning cultural precincts seems redundant in a high-density city natural where clusters already existed (Raco & Gilliam, 2012). Conversely, the cases of Videotage, Soundpocket and Noise to Signal series show the difficulties for artistic ventures to maintain their geographical presence in central areas of Hong Kong.

Hong Kong's planning system is highly functional with respect to top down processes, such as the delivery of low-cost housing and efficient transport. Nevertheless, the bulk of public policies aiming at turning Hong Kong into a creative city stay relatively disconnected from the grassroots processes essential to promoting the middleground institutions that can interlock with a creative economy. These constitute sites of artistic expression at the juncture of public policies and a diverse population of artists inserted in Hong Kong economic, cultural and affective system.

Echoing Finnegan's idea that creativity relies on an interconnected network of social sites that we interpret here as relational space (Harvey, 1973, 2004), this article shows the importance of maintaining a diversity of actors and sites of creativity to nurture the local creative economy. The case of Hong Kong demonstrates that not all artistic worlds are concretized in urban space. The inherently political process of 'planning for creativity' rather lays bare the complex interlocking processes between artists, intermediaries and institutions whose trajectory must be considered relationally rather than in as part of top-down urban strategy.

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