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Homes for China – Hong Kong vertical living standard

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Massive residential tower blocks have infiltrated Hong Kong's territory like a forest, heedless of geography. A look at a map or view from the mountain peaks reveals a violent contrast between the dense high-rise developments and the natural island/mountain settings. From this evident juxtaposition, there is no doubt that the lack of land and a growing population have provided the perfect context with which to experiment with new forms of densities. In this sense, land use and verticality are not the only vectors that set up Hong Kong's urban condition. Optimisation drives the entire system to expand activities and movements at every level of its infrastructure, voids or building blocks. Compactness draws the flowing crowds of people through an intensive network of lifts, escalators, streets and mass transportation that runs in all directions. Speculation and the hectic market prices have discouraged agriculture and industry and forced a hyper-selective urban land use. Through the years, this sectional direction has produced the most fascinating and dynamic form of density that has now found a new extreme in the latest 72-story private residential model in Tsim Sha Tsui East.

Density, connectivity, intensity, speculation and new living conditions are the result of the last 50 years of Hong Kong's public housing policy. With barely 3.5 million people, about half of the population, living in public residential blocks or estates, the government has resolutely directed the vertical rise of housing developments. The more modest of recent developments, now typically include eight towers clustered together with between 40 and 52 floors. With eight flats to a floor, and four people to a flat, that makes one of these developments home to 12,000 people. And with a typical site area of between 2 and 3 hectares, that means a density of up to 6000 people per hectare. When compared with the 250 people per hectare in Haussmann's Paris, and 500 in Singapore, the standard is twice as dense as a more traditional part of Hong Kong like Mong Kok.

1. LIFE AT HYPER-DENSITY

LIVING IN HARMONY

The extensive public housing program originated a few years after the end of the WW II, when the growing squatter problem found a tragic end in the disastrous fire of Christmas Eve 1953, that wiped out 50,000 homes in the Shek Kip Mei squatter camp overnight. Initial project began with a series of "temporary safe housing unit of a minimum standard"¹, to provide collective, basic services around a modest private living space. Yet, even in the first permanent blocks, tenants still had to share water and only had access to toilets or cooking facilities on the communal balconies. Shops on the ground floor and a

kindergarten on the roof usually completed the elementary planning. From these original "Mark 1" factory-shed schemes to the latest cruciform towers known in Hong Kong as "Harmony" blocks, the thorough and well worked out organisation of collective amenities has always served to counterbalance the obvious lack of individual space and privacy. To implement such large-scale plans, the public sector immediately developed prefabricated, factory-made components for cost effective construction. This created a series of standardised models that rapidly spread throughout the territory.

Recently, the private sector has adopted similar typologies, but with a range of programmes that go far beyond the original basic prototype. Derived from a highly competitive context, their planning directly reflects the fickle demands of the real estate market.

LIVING IN A VILLA

In the arena of private housing speculation, architecture is no longer the art of designing buildings, but rather a means of expressing an exclusive concept or a collective fantasy. Advertisement brochures and show rooms certainly gather more attention than the products they sell. Aggressive promotional campaigns start simultaneously with the development's foundations, meaning flats are sold long before their physical completion. Perfected with "classic" or "modern" furniture, the latest TV plasma screen, reproductions of masterpieces and a large number of mirrors, the show flats absorb and reflect a collective dream. In the same way its fake windows support the image of a colourful landscape, an improbable view considering the density in and around the residential complex. But this is hardly the point. Like the original, it presents a specialised residential niche, and strategically packages the local environment and life-style.

Each residential development forms a group of towers mounted on a podium in which a highly diverse range of communal activities takes place, from shopping to restaurants and sports club. These complexes are developed along a unique structure which is repetitive, complete, closed, hermetic, autonomous and perfectly coded. Each development presents a range of choices that varies from one to three bedrooms, with the top floors reserved for duplex-units. Each residential dwelling unit, or cell, on offer is more or less the same, but pretends to be different. Now, however, these 60 storey giants with 12,000 residents are presented in marketing campaigns as if they were colossal "homes" which have somehow managed to preserve the refined atmosphere of a private villa, therefore stretching the private format of the apartment to absorb the public.

LIVING IN A THEME

To a certain degree the podium has become the major selling point. Unfolded as an experimental field, it is the place where the theme applied to the whole development is disclosed. As in theme parks, the basic structure is camouflaged behind a thick crust of screens, walls, lights, mirrors, water and sounds – decorative elements that refer to both fashionable style and to images of luxury. Developers lure buyers with images of a Hawaiian resort, Utopian garden, Medieval castle, Antique Greece, Spanish atmosphere, Renaissance and Baroque sculptures².

To some extent, this superficial interpretation of a theme and the reservoir where styles are endlessly combined together has formed a new aesthetic in response to a new delocalised condition. Today, while Venice and Paris are in Las Vegas, it is no surprise to find Hawaii and Athens in Hong Kong. The former are casinos, yet much more, the latter are super-dormitories - but not only. Both support the architecture of events and their special effects are more important than their functional imperatives. They offer an appropriation without risk, in which the décor matches publicity images found in the brochures and show rooms.

2. ISLAND CULTURE

BRIDGES

Private residential developments are usually built on prized sites. Special value is allotted to isolated yet well connected locations. In the advertisement brochure this ideal situation is reinforced by the propagandistic image of a solitary block raised in the middle of a rural jungle.

Most of medieval castles (the original ones) aimed to offer immediate and further connections to their surroundings. Today, bridges or pedestrian elevated networks, allow most of these enclosed developments to be directly plugged into major transportation hubs and commercial centres. With sophisticated calculation, developers strive to demonstrate their proximity to the centralised infrastructure and prestigious educational institutions. Ultimately, the apartment price will largely depend on these physical links.

DISLOCATION

Becoming part of the new transportation hub, these new centres and/or gateways propose new territorial strategies fully supported by the government. The multiplication of centres along natural (mountain or sea shore) or artificial (transportation infrastructure) lines constitutes an effective strategy with which to colonise remaining parts of the natural countryside. The mass railway transportation system and terminals are the essential elements in reproducing this model to the limits of the territory. This expressive vision confirms the actual strength of a few private corporations, as railway lines move forward, new centres emerge.

Competition to create a centre, and then to become a new locus, informs developers' strategies. Two major transformations have recently given Hong Kong new directions for territorial development. First, was the construction of the new airport at Chek Lap Kok, an artificial island, linked by a series of gigantic bridges, a special MTR express line which connects the airport to Central in 23 minutes, with a series of new stations/centres in-between. The second will be the West KCR line, which will connect the western part of the New Territories to Kowloon and the eastern line.

FORTRESS ISLAND

The height of the perimeter walls and the successive security gates, inspired by the medieval fortress model, increase the feeling of being isolated and well protected. As an extension of the wall, private, closed circuit surveillance is monitored from a central control room and can be viewed on residents' TV sets. Inside the electronic gated system, each residential block lives as a bloated private enclave where the programme of pleasures is engaged in a hostile relationship with the outside world. As Jeremy Riffin suggests in the Age of access³, the definition of property moves towards the notion of access, to create new boundaries for clearly defined communities. New scenarios of living are about inclusion and exclusion, as control, restrictions and rules reinforce segregation.

3. THE VIP SOCIETY

24-HOUR SERVICE

To alleviate the stress of a dense urban living environment, each enclave is equipped with a full range of services for its 'hyper-refined' residents. These facilities replicate the style and organisation of a palatial hotel in order to offer them what promoters call "VIP therapy". These 24-hour services generally include baby-sitting, maid, laundry, emergency home repair, newspaper and magazine delivery, clubhouse, limousine, carpark, maintenance and car wash, and shuttle bus service. Some of the latest developments even go a step

further with complete exclusion and autonomy from the immediate urban area, employing a team of doctors and tutors to look after residents'.

For Rifkin, the tendency to multiply services appeared with the passage from conventional ownership to the leasing spirit. The formula – "Everything is a service",⁴ has encouraged developers to augment the profit from selling a flat with the trade of innumerable services. Management and membership fees, usually up to 10% of the monthly rental value, establish a long-term relationship with developers. To some extent, buyers even exchange their positions as owners to become 'eternal customers'.

e-LIVING

Developed for command and control, the e-network is another key feature added to enhance the home package. The overall idea of e-living is its unlimited capacity to give access, provide and record data, all for the exclusive use of residents. The feeling of being connected certainly intensifies the belief of being one of the fortunate few, thus creating another social group. In addition to a totally controlled environment, another apex is formed by the use of mobile phones as remote control devices to organise and manage every single aspect of daily life. "You'll never truly be away from home", the motto of Villa Esplanada⁵, does not mean that inhabitants work at home. It is not about a possible blurring between office and home, but about the capacity to be in constant interaction with your home – to control lighting, temperature, and music before you open the door. This electronic network also gives access to additional services such as e-shopping, e-banking and e-entertainment.

THE CLUBHOUSE

The relationship between recreation and residential places the clubhouse in a key position, as an articulation between the podium and the apartment. Open to members only, it emphasises the notion of a luxury hotel as a model for mass housing, with recreational programmes and sports – meaning physical culture and relaxation. Detached from street level, the podium's roof is designed as an outdoor theme-park where a variety of recreational activities are organised, focused around its dominant feature, the swimming pool with its perfectly controlled atmosphere. Indoor activities are connected from the landscape garden to specific additional components or to the podium's inner bowels. Simulation and virtuality are often used to compensate for an evident lack of space for wider activities such as skiing or golf.

A stage for the clubhouse, interior gardens, swimming pools or parking garages, the podium can accommodate any form of program. Its simple structure allows maximum flexibility in generating and intensifying the fantastic juxtapositions of its activities. An opaque cubic base, the podium's inner-space unfolds a fictional adventure for its select players, similar to theme parks, it belongs to an emerging tradition of architectural dream-worlds.

The swimming pool is the key feature of the development, functioning as an essential element in the dream house concept and commanding a significant place in real-estate brochures. Negating existing water conditions in Hong Kong, Caribbean Coast⁶ has recently pushed the water theme to its limits, with a 120-metre artificial beach and a number of outdoor and indoor swimming pools. As a major location for social activities, the swimming pool refers to the resort and to the impression of being on holiday 365 days a year.

4. 1/8 HARMONY CELL

THE APARTMENT

The private apartment appears as the last refuge from massive development. It no longer matters if the dwelling space is minimal as each inhabitant is free to use the entire complex as an extension of his/her own space. As a result of the maximum optimisation of the tower plan, the 1/8 harmony cell is the minimum unit capable of being systematised in any scheme, like eight individual houses tacked onto a central core on each floor. The logic of the plan is very simple. A typical apartment layout comprises a living/dining room, kitchen, one or two bathrooms, two or three bedrooms – all accommodated within approximately 550-800 sq.ft. Efficiency rates of floor areas are directed by the curtailed circulation space in the unit.

This ratio assumes that the gap between public and private residential development has widened as the former still accommodates 70 sq.ft. per person. With an average of 150 sq.ft. per person, the private sector offers quite generous apartments by Hong Kong standards, but still inferior to the 200 to 250 sq.ft. per person in China.

A SHOW PIECE

The living/dining area is regarded as a show piece. In addition to expensive materials, imported brand name products are used for fixtures and settings, becoming the final touch of a luxurious modern lifestyle. Golden grid with lion heads, sculpted locks, a maximisation of mirrors, crystal lustre, aquarium and plasma screen, are all introduced to make the living room more substantial. Conventional wisdom has disappeared in order to promote the image of a stereotyped western culture, both de-localised and a-temporal. Usually assuming the function of entrance and centralising the distribution of the entire flat, the living/dining room is the interface between public (image provided for the collective) and private (family members).

The master bedroom - a private capsule that articulates multiple services, hi-tech comfort, and sensorial gratification, is the ultimate private space in the complex. With the bed representing the most irreducible place, the concept of a cocoon becomes real: "far removed from a work-weary world the peacefulness of your new home brings harmony to your life."⁷

CONCLUSION FOR NEW STRATEGIC LIVING

These new design concepts for residential tower blocks have rendered the conventional role of the architect redundant. Perpetuating the illusion of "home" is big business for real estate developers. They have stretched the boundaries of the private house to absorb the public in a collective realm. Insufficient land and mass production are not simply real estate issues. Homogeneity and collectivity versus diversity and individuality, these oppositions exemplify China's political strategy – how to combine communist and capitalist systems. The private sector cleverly manipulates the social patterns of Hong Kong, making the one child family a model for sophisticated living. The fashionable vertical living environment, with its cloned family stereotype, functions as a mechanism of consumer society offering a standard product with remarkable packaging to justify its exorbitant price. Chic ghettos for very rich families – where the only criterion is money – are spreading through the urban landscape, enabling a new set of speculative battles.

1. Public Housing Development, Rising High in Harmony (Hong Kong: HKHA, 1993).
2. They appropriate stereotypes of travel posters, art's movement and time period.
3. Jeremy Rifkin, The Age of Access (London: Penguin, 2000).
4. Ibid., 73.

5. © Villa Esplanada, Sun Hing Kai Properties.
6. © Caribbean Coast, Cheung Kong Property Development Limited.
7. © Villa Athena, Sun Hing Kai Properties.