

Spaces of the Recent Past: Cinematic Investigations for a Marketplace in the Space of Flows

The subject of this investigation is a physical crossroads of people of different ethnicities, nationalities and socio-economic status, both locals and foreigners, and which hosts a spontaneous mix of formal and informal programs. It connects to several large palaces of consumption (shopping malls) and a major international stock exchange. And, it is a marketplace, which is both metaphor for, and host of, the global exchange of capital, goods and services. If there are sites where the “space of flows” materializes, Hong Kong’s Central Market would arguably be one of them. Like other enclaves that inhabit the public imagination about the city, such as the (long demolished) Kowloon Walled City, the Chung King Mansions, and even the Chek Lap Kok International Airport, Central Market is a miniature of the global city nested within itself. The market ceased operations in 2003 and the building has been abandoned since. What to do with the Central Market has been the subject of the city’s public discourse on authenticity in the urban realm, and the site of opposing claims to public space.

SPACES OF THE RECENT PAST

Design research on the Central Market took the form of a graduate architecture studio at the Wentworth Institute of Technology.¹ We traveled as a group to Hong Kong and explored “Space(s) of the Recent Past” through the medium of the moving image, and experimented with the making of short movies as the generator for architectural and urban design. The studio was conducted in the fall of 2011 and 2012, a period just after the city had completed a round of public meetings on the future of the building (which was originally slated for demolition), and before the announcement in 2013 of the selection of a final design. During the interim, we were able to evaluate the various architectural proposals while we ourselves explored alternate futures for the Central Market.²

The studio began with a study of the work of Hong Kong filmmaker Wong Kar-Wai, in particular two movies, *Chung King Express* and *In the Mood for Love*.³ Wong’s movies are instructive for his use of devices such as repetitive loops of action and music, stop-motion, and narrowly framed views; techniques through

JENNIFER L. MICHALISZYN

Wentworth Institute of Technology

which he captures the tight spaces, textured layers and speed that characterize the city. We also looked to Wong's work because it is marked both by the energy and ebullience for the future characteristic of new(er) economies, and also (or because of its constant re-generation,) a nostalgia for the recent past. While in Hong Kong, the students recorded their site observations as short digital movies. They studied sites such as the Central Market where the layers of Hong Kong's many short lives are particularly perceivable. The translation of those movies into conceptual and spatial models guided the development of a specific program framed loosely as "Space(s) of the Recent Past".

Since the 'recent past' is never fixed and is always slipping away, there is a relationship between the dynamism of the city and the futility of attempts to capture or recreate the past, which gets at the pain which lies at the root of the word nostalgia, "homesickness". In both cases, time rather than space dominates, hence the moving image is a particularly appropriate medium through which to explore these concepts. "Space(s) of the Recent Past" suggests that the two tendencies (speed and change vs. the particularity of a place and moment) are not in opposition, but rather in tension, and further explores how in fact one might be grounded in the other.



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A MARKETPLACE

The Central Market building housed a "wet market" for meat and vegetables for over sixty years before it was shuttered in 2003. The modernist concrete steel frame building was built in 1939, its footprint is approximately 50 meters wide by 120 meters long, and it stands three and a half stories high. The site has hosted a market for over a century, and the current building is the fourth to occupy the site. Earlier buildings were built and demolished in 1842, 1857 and 1895.⁵

The building is located in Central, the central business district of Hong Kong where many important financial and government institutions are housed; and is bounded by Queen's Road on one side, a street address shared by the Hong Kong Shanghai Banking Corporation headquarters (Norman Foster and Partners) as well as the China Bank tower (I.M. Pei and Partners). Central Market also lies on the old boundary between Central and Sheung Wan, formerly the European and Chinese settlements respectively.

Figure 1: The Central Market in 2010.⁴

In the late eighties and nineties, an end bay of the market building was rebuilt to accommodate accessible circulation and public restrooms. The building was also connected to a podium level public network that connects most of Central. After standing vacant for almost ten years, the building was slated for demolition and redevelopment. However, the public passageway was sealed off from the abandoned building and remained in use, creating a strange condition where the modern ruin was penetrated by an incredibly banal space, and whose users are oblivious to the beautiful and haunted space just on the other side of the wall.

Central Market lies at the base of the Mid-level escalators, a open-air escalator that operates downhill in the morning and uphill in the afternoon, and extends from Central to a (wealthy expatriate) residential enclave on the steep hillside above. It is situated at an intersection of public and private space, and plugs into the multi-level public infrastructure of elevated footbridges and shopping malls. It is possible to disembark the cross-harbor ferry and walk to and through the Central Market all the way to the Mid-levels without once touching the traditional street.



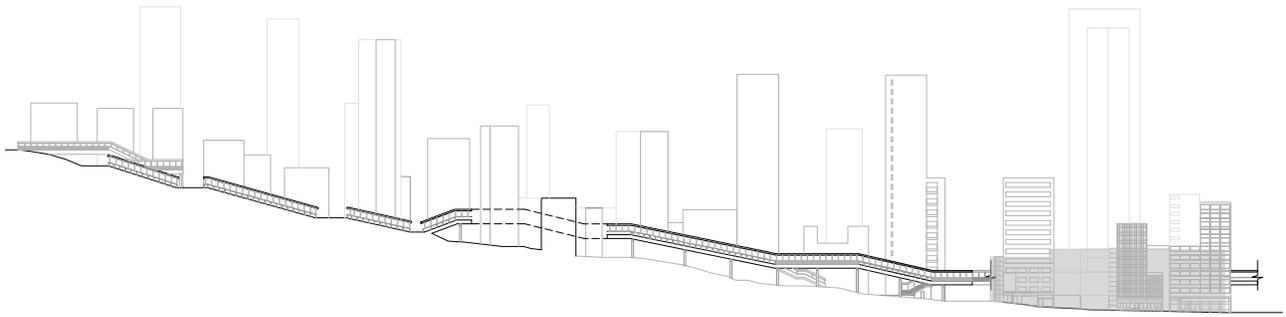
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THE SPACE OF FLOWS

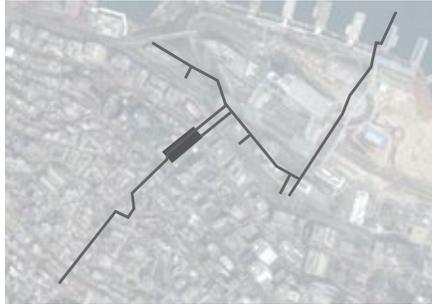
The vast network of pedestrian bridges, outdoor escalators, office tower lobbies and shopping malls is arguably an example of the “spontaneous malling” Margaret Crawford described twenty years ago in “Mall Space”.⁷ The same profit-making mechanisms described by Crawford have led to the proliferation of the podium-tower typology in Hong Kong, and the domination of the public realm by spaces of consumerism. The related critique of the “ageographical city,”⁸ as “the dissipation of all stable relations to local physical and cultural geography, the loosening of ties to any specific space...with a proliferation of new modes of segregation...” in Michael Sorkin’s introduction to *Variations on a Theme Park and the End of Public Space* might be applied to this “space of flows” because they share the homogenizing tendencies of the spatial and financial models of consumption, and the ease of export of those models. Some of this infrastructure had already been built at the time of the writing of *Variations*, but since then there has been an exponential growth of this network.

However, the magnitude, intensity, acceleration or multiplication of this condition is arguably a source of a rich, unique and ‘authentic’ urbanism, counter to

Figure 2: Central Market Interior.⁶



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North American examples. Despite the heat and humidity, many of the elevated walkways are not sealed, thus removing one set of barriers that isolates similar structures in the North American context. Likewise, the city's steep topography connects second and even third level footbridges directly to grade, in contrast to the segregation that occurs in a more horizontal landscape. Lastly, the (hyper) density and diversity of the city fills all levels with a variety of formal and informal activity.

Finally, an introduction to the Central Market and the debate over its future should be set in the wider context of rising public interest in architectural conservation: Ho Yin Lee and Lynn Distefano of the University of Hong Kong have tracked the evolving attitudes, activism and policy development of "Heritage Conservation" in Hong Kong:

"The year 2007 will probably go down in history as the year when the people of Hong Kong collectively woke up to the call for protecting their built heritage, particularly in the urban context. Since the demolition of the Star Ferry Pier and Clock Tower, issues of urban conservation have been widely discussed and debated not only with academic and professional circles but also in the mass media."⁹

The built environment has become politicized. As Distefano and Lee describe, there has been unprecedented public outcry (in which people literally chained themselves to buildings) in the wake of the demolition of some public buildings. The city's policies concerning heritage preservation, which include those that address Central and the Central Market, have been written largely in response to these protests. Therefore, the following diverse proposals are set against this backdrop of a very real debate about ownership of public space.

CINEMATIC INVESTIGATIONS

The studio took a cinematic approach: the site context challenges conventional modes of representing the city, while the moving image is particularly suited to capturing the over-lapping network of spaces dislocated from the ground-plane, and the layers, textures and weathering of surfaces. Also, as it turns out, an examination of time as it relates to speed, change and memory in the city underlies almost all of the student explorations, and the medium of the moving image allows for the exploration and representation of the many perceptions of time: as unfolding both linearly and non-linearly, as fragmentary, or in its potential for simultaneity. Wong's unconventional narrative structure and associated editing of the action provided students with many examples of how to record their perceptions of time and space on the site. On returning to Boston, students translated their movies into "three-dimensional storyboards"; "storyboards" requiring students contend with time, speed and change in physical model.

Figure 3: Site section through (a portion of) the Mid-level escalators, Louis Joseph.

Figure 4: (Simplified) plan of the elevated connection from the harbor through the Central Market to the Mid-levels, Brendon Duffy.

Wong Kar-Wai's movies as framed through two analytical texts acted as a sort of guidebook to the city for the studio: Ackbar Abbas' *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*¹⁰ and Christina Lee's "'We'll Always Have Hong Kong': Uncanny Spaces and Disappearing Memories in the Films of Wong Kar Wai".¹¹ In the years leading up to the handover in 1997 (which reverted Hong Kong sovereignty from Great Britain to China), cultural critic Ackbar Abbas describes a "culture of disappearance"¹² in Hong Kong, where that which was previously unseen suddenly becomes visible or perceivable because of its imminent demise. Other critics note the wave of nostalgia that seemed to hit the city in the years following 1997, with popular tastes in clothing and décor leaning towards "vintage" items. Abbas argues that in contrast to that sort of uncritical or even consumerist nostalgia, the aesthetic of Wong Kar-Wai's movies uses disappearance to combat disappearance. While Abbas's critique and Wong's movies have become historical documents of the apprehension and optimism of that time, the concept of "a culture of disappearance" remains potent for the testing of a "critical nostalgia" as a strategy for operating and intervening within an existing building and urban fabric.

Christina Lee quotes the distinction made by Svetlana Boym between a "reflective nostalgia" and a "restorative nostalgia", borrowing the former to describe Wong's movies. "Restorative nostalgia manifests in total reconstructions of monuments of the past, while reflective nostalgia lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place and another time..."¹³ If the most impoverished version of "restorative nostalgia" in the design of urban spaces is the use of ersatz historical motifs, and "reflective nostalgia" is design that reveals what was once there, then this studio explores a 'critical nostalgia' where the potential for collective identity is built upon an *absence* of collective memory, or a void where something never existed.

The students' filmic investigations of Central Market pursued overlapping sets of themes. One grouping revolved around these ideas of memory, disappearance and a 'critical nostalgia,' while other explorations were directed towards speed, fragmentation, alienation, and disorientation; qualities of the city typically associated with globalization and placelessness. In a similar paradoxical turn, students based their design strategies on the supposedly place-negating attributes of the spaces of globalization to propose interventions that are very much specific to the landscape of Hong Kong, and which is argued here constitutes a kind of authenticity.

CRITICAL NOSTALGIA

Two student projects elaborate upon the concept of a "critical nostalgia". They focus on the fantastical juxtaposition of an intense urban network of circulation against a hidden void: a hauntingly beautiful - and vast - empty space hiding in plain sight within the middle of the city. The abandoned market is marked throughout with the traces of its past occupation (empty stalls imply the scale of the human figure, posters still adorn the walls, stenciled signage directs shoppers long since departed, and even the occasional dry gourd sits unsold on countertops). The space is illuminated with daylight diffused by dust, and the thick walls block the noise of the city to a surprising degree. It is a poignant space one is stunned to discover in the heart of the city.

"A/Void"¹⁴ makes absence present through a cinematic and architectural transformation of the courtyards in the original building into voids that are

experienced but never occupied. Multiple paths circle and pass through the voids. The voids are filled temporarily with ephemeral program and performances, while the fixed programs in the rest of the building meet the needs of the everyday. Like the void, the nostalgic object of desire, and a singular definition of identity, are difficult to experience, but the glancing attempts to do so might be more gratifying.

Quoting Wong, “there is a need in all of us to have a place to hide or store certain memories, thoughts, impulses, hopes and dreams...”¹⁵ the project “Retrace Your



Steps” refers to both the mental and emotional journey one takes when reminded of the past by spatializing the cinematic “loop”. Both of the project’s filmic and spatial loops turn in on themselves, manifesting the nostalgic desire to return, or to re-enact. The existing architectural artifact is repurposed through the reintroduction of the open-air theater, one of the earliest uses of the site, as a space where the past is not revisited but continually reinvented.

In both projects a *lack*, such as a void or a path that loops but does not deliver, forms the basis for creating new meaning on the site. Students were surprised to discover that very few people they interviewed could identify where the Central Market was, and none could recall any specific memories of the place, despite it having been only ten years since it closed. In this context, a lack of identity (or a multiplicity of identities) is an authentic expression of an urban culture based not on collective memory, but in a *collective amnesia*.

SPACE OF (EX)CHANGE

In contrast to the first pair of projects discussed above, other students explored the dynamic context around the market. Perhaps stemming from an initial instinct to reanimate the market and reconnect to the life around it, this group found the empty building stagnant, rather than poignant. Instead of exploring the perception of time as it relates to memory and nostalgia, the emphasis of these projects was

Figure 5: “A/Void”, Lucy Brown.

Figure 6: “Retrace Your Steps”, Kevin Conant.



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time in terms of speed, (ex)change and fragmentation. They were more interested in how the multi-story network of private spaces like corporate office lobbies and shopping centers also hosted numerous informal vendors, eateries, and even protests. One student's unmanipulated footage shows the almost unbelievable layering of multiple walkways, while another project, "Limbo" registers the fragmentary experience of the site against the strip windows of the Central Market, and how differing perceptions of time are spatialized on the site. Some projects contended that because it has been built and demolished three times, the identity of the site does not lie with the structure itself, but within the dynamic nexus of programs that outlives the building. One student explored the perverse notion of preserving the public passageway that was cut through the Central Market – and nothing else.¹⁶

Another project, "Reverse Hallucination" identifies the contradictory demands from the public to both preserve the building and to turn the site into a park: it examines the temporary wrapper that has been applied to the building, including trompe l'oeil perspectival views into the "new" interior of the building, which depicts scenes of an "urban oasis," or park. The investigation borrows Abbas' concept of a "reverse hallucination."¹⁷ If a hallucination is to see something which is not there, than a reverse hallucination is to not see something which is there. In this case, the hallucination is the fantasy of the urban realm as park, and the reverse hallucination is the "unseeing" of the vibrant public life which surrounds the Central Market.

Similarly, "Intervals of Space" locates the specificity and richness of the site in the juxtaposition of many different programs. The site movie is a programmatic mash-up that reimagines Central Market as a horizontal skyscraper. The filmic device of fading to black, or the jump cut, is translated to three-dimensions as a series of screen-like walls that both divide and allow intensely different programs to abut each other in a single structure.

This second set of projects sees the particularities of Hong Kong urbanism in the network and the nexus, and re-imagines the Central Market not as a market building, but in its longstanding function as a space of *change* and of *exchange*.

CONCLUSION

Hong Kong's Central Market is not an important building for either programmatic or tectonic reasons. It is not a civic or religious building, but one in which people

Figure 7: Pedestrian Bridges, Renee Michelson.

Figure 8: "Limbo", Robert Marshall.

Figure 9: "Reverse Hallucination", Jeffrey Bento.

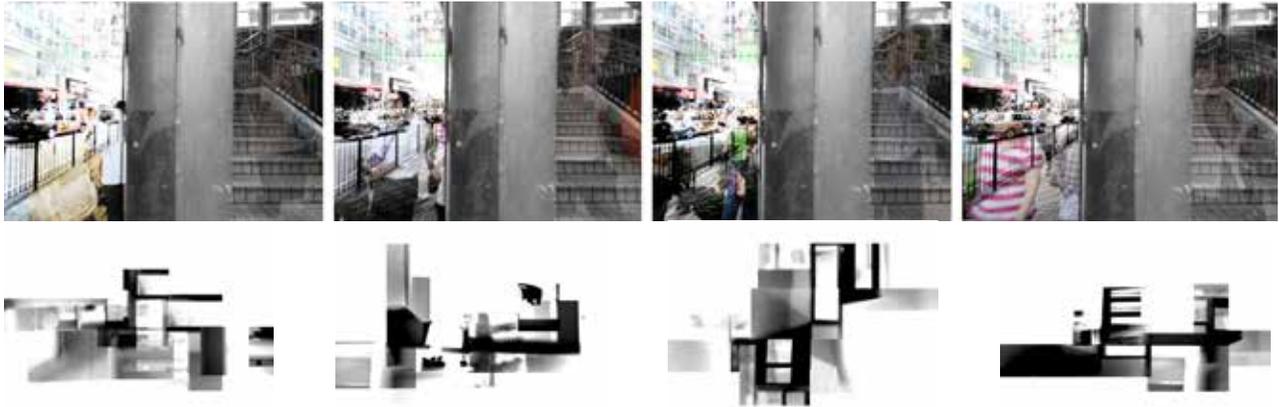


Figure 10: "Intervals of Space", by Joseph Meucci.

ENDNOTES

1. Students: Stephen Akerblom, Jeffrey Bento, Lucy Brown, Kevin Conant, Kyle Cruz, Sinead Gallivan, Nicholas Gianetti, Robert Marshall, Joseph Meucci, Renee Michelson (2012). Jacob Augunas, Brendon Duffy, Lindsey Fortunato, Louis Rood Joseph, Andrew Martin, Ian Robinson, Cristina Rogers, Evan White, Zhen Wu (2011).
2. With thanks to the Hong Kong Urban Redevelopment Authority.
3. *In the Mood for Love*. Directed by Wong Kar-Wai. Hong Kong: Block 2 Pictures, 2000. *Chung King Express*. Directed by Wong Kar-Wai. Hong Kong: Jet Tone Production, 1994.
4. The Central Oasis Community Advisory Committee, March 2010.
5. "The Central Oasis: The Building," accessed September 17, 2013. www.centraloasis.org.hk.
6. Hong Kong Stories (Series 12): "Touring the Markets" accessed September 18, 2013. <http://programme.rthk.org.hk/rthk/tv/programme.php?name=tv/hongkongstories12e&p=5077&pid=73797&m=photo&e=142196#album>
7. Margaret Crawford, "Mall Space" in Michael Sorkin, ed., *Variations on a Theme Park*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1992. 11.
8. Sorkin, xiii-xiv.
9. DiStefano, Lynn and Lee, Hoyin. "Urbanism and Conservation on the Victoria Harbourfront." *SPACE (Korea) Issue 477 (2007-8)*. With thanks to Dr. Hoyin Lee, who suggested the Central Market as a site for the studio, and for hosting us in Hong Kong.
10. Abbas, M.A. *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.
11. Lee, Christina. "'We'll Always Have Hong Kong': Uncanny Spaces and Disappearing Memories in the Films of Wong Kar Wai." in Christina Lee, Ed., *Violating Time: History, Memory, and Nostalgia in Cinema*. New York: Continuum, 2008.
12. Abbas, 7-8.
13. Lee, 137.
14. Project descriptions adapted from text provided by the students.
15. Lee, 125.
16. "Same Place Different Space" by Nicholas Gianetti.
17. Abbas, 6.
18. Sorkin, xv.

conducted the business of their everyday lives; nor is it an example of elevated or refined architectural detail, material or building technology. Per Abbas' definition of "disappearance," it would have been torn down unceremoniously had it closed a few years earlier.

Design research on "Spaces of the Recent Past" makes a few overlapping propositions. The first, questions of how to intervene in the modern ruin of the Central Market lead to diverse cinematic explorations of the relationship between site and disappearance, and suggests a 'critical nostalgia' where sense of place is defined by absence and a collective amnesia. Second, attributes of the urban nexus around the Central Market which we associate with globalization and the space of flows, such as speed, change, disorientation, sameness, and consumption, does not necessarily result in a placelessness, but constitutes a kind of "authenticity" or particularity to the urban landscape of Hong Kong. In the North American context, where similar sites of consumption might become segregated from public space, here a radical mixing occurs. Some critics equate "a return to a more authentic urbanity, a city based on physical proximity and free movement and a sense that the city is our best expression of a desire for collectivity..." with "the struggle of democracy itself."¹⁸ While the basis for "authenticity" may differ in this context, the events around the redevelopment of the Central Market in Hong Kong represent a case of mature public and professional debate on the fate of an important urban and public space. While fictional, the cinematic design investigations presented here are a part of a very real, lively and on-going debate of public participation and the design of the urban realm.