AT HOME WITH DENSITY
SPATIAL REPRESENTATION IN HONG KONG
PUBLIC HOUSING

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Abstract

This study examines the representation of space in high-density Hong Kong public housing. Over half the population in Hong Kong lives in public housing yet little is known about how they physically cope with density through everyday dwelling. Specifically, this post-occupancy study attempts to highlight the context of high density dwelling as a legitimate dwelling experience. It focuses on residents' interpretation and conception of space and examines problem-solving in the everyday context of high density living.

The research is presented as a narrative highlighting spatial sensibilities in a culture of density. It traces the development of housing forms from early Hong Kong to the establishment of the Government housing programme. It will be argued that the combination of a massive influx of a refugee population, and a shortage of housing in the Territory created a situation where low-level design standards in public housing were not only accepted by the population but became the norm.

Through qualitative interviews with long-term residents of public housing this study proposes to question assumptions of Western spatial thinking within domestic space. It looks at the way in which the changing habitus has been affected by social mobility and shifting cultural values of space; in particular, it examines how different generations living in the same household perceive and represent their home.

This thesis contributes to an emerging field of design knowledge. It is a reflective study which, it is anticipated, will provide other designers with insight into lived-in qualities of density and residents' ability to articulate design knowledge. It seeks to challenge designers' preconceptions of density and the performance of professional design knowledge in the interpretation of everyday space.
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PREFACE

From The Outside Looking In

For years, my closest contact with the Hong Kong home followed the route of the 62K minibus. As it winds its way through Wo Che Estate it passes high rise blocks and offers a glimpse of the homes inside. (Plate 1) Behind each window, beyond the hanging laundry and array of plants, lies a home. It is invariably brightly lit and densely packed. On a good day, you might see the edge of a bunkbed and people moving about, but it is impossible to see the whole space. My long-standing fascination with the Hong Kong home stems from being on the outside.

With half the population of Hong Kong living in some form of Public housing most Hong Kong residents tend to take it for granted that most of their friends and colleagues live in similar, if not identical densely packed spaces. It is generally accepted that Hong Kong people entertain friends in restaurants, rather than at home. The home is usually considered too small for guests, other than family and close friends. An invitation home for dinner with the family is therefore seen as an unexpected mark of acceptance, especially by foreigners. But if you are not Hong Kong Chinese how can you find out what these spaces are like inside?

If first hand access is denied, we must rely on secondary sources. But published images of HK homes tend to concentrate on visual extremes; caged homes, the walled city or luxury apartments. There is little in between. Domestic scenes portrayed on television dramas invariably look too stagy, and films altogether too gritty. It seems only newspaper photographs documenting “the scene of the crime” offer a glimpse of the real thing. And so, the longer I live here, the more I have come to realise that I really know nothing about where Hong Kong people live. The ordinary Hong Kong home remains a spatial enigma.

The Hong Kong Tourist Authority have capitalised on foreigners’ fascination with their “Family Insight Tour” which shows tourists a glimpse of life on a housing estate; the wet market, a kindergarten or old people’s centre and a typical family flat. Thus, public housing homes have become a popular tourist attraction, yet remain a side of Hong Kong that most expatriate residents never see. By the same token, few local people have seen inside an expatriate’s flat.

Of course the best way to find out about the Hong Kong home is to ask the people who live there. It is sometimes said that Hong Kong people only use their home as a place to
sleep and store things. Younger people, especially, appear to spend a great deal of time away from the home. They refer vaguely to it being crowded but it is hard to visualise exactly what that means. Too many people, too little space, too many things? And yet, people never seem to complain. There is an underlying acceptance in Hong Kong this is what dwelling is.

So it may seem that there is little more to be said. However, in the work of Interior Design students it can be seen how growing up in Hong Kong creates a particular spatial sensibility. In the First Year of Interior Design studies, students are asked to propose a scheme to convert a factory space into living accommodation to share with a classmate. The design problem they face here is having too much space, or at any rate far more than they might have at home for their whole family.

As designers in the making, their approach to design is often naïve yet at the same time refreshingly free from spatial conventions. Since they are not aware of design paradigms they inadvertently challenge the conventions of domestic space. As they analyse and prioritise space they are forced to make sense of their domestic experiences towards a design ideal. It is striking how little privacy they feel they need to co-habit with a stranger, even of the opposite sex. They might, for example, have two huge bathrooms and separate meditation rooms for quiet retreat, yet highly visible bedroom spaces. This is a stated preference, stemming from a real experience, it is difficult to make valid design criticism of a legitimate preference.

Faced with all this space they may opt for a small bedroom, with bunk beds placed against the wall, "because I like to sleep this way" - since they have always slept this way. And, once they have accommodated their basic functional needs they tend to invent "special features" to fill up space, rather than retain space, as space.

Design teachers everywhere may have similar observations to make. As students cross the bridge to becoming a designer they find they must let go of their personal experience of space. In Hong Kong the gap between the experience of high density dwelling in the public estates and the idealised space of international design is particularly wide. How then do the majority of Hong Kong people’s homes fit in the context of design? This question raises anxieties about design on a personal level. Comfortable with our knowledge of design ‘universals’ designers tend to overlook, or ignore non-designer’s sense of spatial reasoning and experience since it falls outside recognised standards of design. Even in this first year project, design judgement is revealed to be on shaky ground.
when it comes to appraising a design response within the domestic sphere. And we fail as designers if we fail to acknowledge the way other people live.

In a follow up project, students were asked to carry out a group design research project based on their own homes. This was not about spatial aspiration but real life domestic experiences. One student described how she had to sleep half under a suspended cabinet, she had adapted to it and now found she quite liked it. Another girl was amused to compare an IKEA cabinet from the catalogue with its neat display of books and white tulips to the reality of the same cabinet in her home, stuffed full of everyday household necessities.

Everyone talked about having to work on the dining table at night when the rest of the family had gone to bed. One student's sister only ever telephones her friends after 11.00pm and turns the TV up to mask her conversation from the other family members. One boy's mother comes home from work late and proceeds to do the family laundry from 2.00-5.00am when everyone else is asleep. Another student noticed that her grandmother chose to sit near the door, rather than in main living area so as not to disturb anyone.

Interestingly, when one group of students visited a classmate's open plan public housing home they found they did not know how to read the space or quite where to sit. Is it acceptable to sit on the bed? They were confused, but found there was much more to talk about in this home than in the more conventional partitioned space. Everything they had previously discounted and ignored in their projection and analysis of a designed home, they now discovered was an essential part of their dwelling experience. In this project students confronted the reality of their own domestic situation complete with grandmothers, IKEA cabinets, and late-night laundry. I too discovered that the Hong Kong public estate home was less standardised and infinitely more interesting than my brief glimpses from the 62k. The problem that presented itself was how to articulate this spatial sensibility.

The domestic sphere is only one aspect of local space. Nevertheless, student projects offer an insight into local construction of space. One student who designed an exhibition space based on a park theme was absolutely true to his experience of spatial priorities. Without any hint of irony and no sense of controversy, he ignored natural elements and instead focused on making an extensive use of lampposts and lights - all authentic, everyday features of Hong Kong parks.
By the time students reach their final year they have lost this quirkiness, as we are apt to call such “misreadings” of design. In effect, design education alters their vision and knowledge of space, for education is concerned with acquired knowledge.

My fascination for visual images revealing the hidden spaces of everyday Hong Kong domestic space was echoed by other expatriates. In contrast, my students showed complete indifference towards these images. As cultural insiders they had seen it all before, and as potential designers, they felt this was none of their concern. It was all too familiar, it could not possibly be design. There was nothing here they could see that could constitute good design.

Other Chinese designers seem to agree. At a recent conference on design, in Beijing, my paper on Hong Kong homespace appealed to foreigners but not the Chinese designers, who could not interpret this research as having anything to do with design. Perhaps they felt I was patronising them. Perhaps Chinese designers, whether from Hong Kong or Beijing have become so used to contemporary design coming from the “West” that my focus on an everyday space, rather than designed spaces appeared pointless.

One well-meaning colleague was concerned that I could be misled by my enthusiasm. They pointed out that it was only because I was a cultural outsider that I found these spaces interesting. In order to understand a phenomenon that I clearly could know nothing about, they recommended that I conduct a questionnaire survey with a sample of at least a hundred tenants to achieve an accurate, quantifiable response. I knew that I was not looking for water-tight quantifiable answers. My enthusiasm was not misplaced, indeed it was forcing me to question my interpretation of domestic space and the coexistence of other interpretations within an everyday space. And while I may lack an insider’s knowledge I have the advantage of greater objectivity.

What other strategies should we adopt to examine such spatial knowledge? Another colleague insisted I should test an established theory on homespace in the Hong Kong context. But, as a designer, I needed to be able to explore Hong Kong homespace in more detail before trading in theory - precisely because I do not know what I expect to find. On one level I agree designers cannot ignore how our professional knowledge affects how we see the world. There is still the nagging doubt that there must be other ways of understanding homespace within design.
Within design circles I have always been irritated and puzzled by designers' declaration that it is their duty to "educate the public". It is such a pat response, that presumes the public have no ideas of their own. Instead I feel the need to educate myself about the particular spatial sensibilities that have developed in relation to high density living in Hong Kong and to discover more about the way space is represented by non-designers, to discover how they "see" design in their home.

Recently, the Occupational Therapy department of HKPU needed to simulate a domestic environment so students could learn about working with the disabled in the home environment. The expatriate lecturer set out with a clear vision that it should be in a IKEA style: pine bookshelves and tables, soft lighting and a chintz sofa, which she felt might also be used to educate students taste. However, her Hong Kong Chinese colleague had very different ideas on what she considered would reflect good taste: black leather (vinyl) sofa, pastel curtains and a white display cabinet. Brought in, as an expert, to mediate, I could appreciate their dilemma.
INTRODUCTION
A Case Study in Design

In 1981, the Industrial Design departments of Ontario College of Art and the Hong Kong Polytechnic secured a large grant to collaborate on the design of a modular furniture system for families living in high density Hong Kong Public housing. The team subsequently designed and built the system within a unit allocated to them by the Hong Kong Housing Authority, who fully supported the design project.

At the outset the design team was assured of their design method and their capacity to create a viable design solution. Their stated aim was:

"...to substantially improve the human environment through the safe utilization of the extremely limited interior space."

It was fully expected that both Canadian and Chinese students would benefit from the experience of working closely with each other. There were, however, fundamental differences in their approaches to problem-solving and design. The Hong Kong students were drawing board designers with little practical experience. The Canadians were older, had extensive practical experience and were keen to get on with building the prototype.

Preliminary research into the problems of density was thorough. The team carried out an extensive survey recording and documenting over 200 homes to establish major problems areas. They soon focused on the problems of density that were easily articulated by residents: the morning rush for the bathroom and the problem of cooking smells filtering through the flat. Originally, the HKHA made the stipulation that the team must not alter any existing partitions: the design response was to be based only on internal fittings and decoration. However, in this instance, in order to solve the identified problems the team requested, and was given approval, to switch the position of the kitchen and bathroom - a move which the residents found to be quite successful.

The team identified two key problems: the need for spatial flexibility and the provision of adequate ventilation. Both of these, they decided, could be solved through the use of a

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1 Space Utilisation in Hong Kong Public Housing: A Co-Operative Research project, Final Project Report, OCA and HKP, 1988
2 The team had in fact identified a fundamental problem with the space planning of the HKHA design - something, they felt could be solved through closer attention to tenant feedback. But, by overstepping the brief in this way they were not in fact responding to the real constraints of the space as experienced by a tenant. And, as it turned out, by shifting the position of the kitchen the smoke simply filtered into the next door flat which caused problems between the tenant of this flat and their neighbour. In solving one problem the team, had inadvertently created another problem.
plenum wall. It was believed a fan-assisted air flow from behind the wall would provide sufficient cool air throughout the flat. They also decided that the plenum wall could be incorporated into a modular furniture system to provide for the family’s storage needs. In this way, they felt they had facilitated a convenient arrangement of space, which the family could change to suit their changing needs.

When the project was finished it received a great deal of publicity both in Hong Kong and overseas. It was to all intents and purposes a highly commendable scheme. (Plate 2)

After the publicity had died down, Mr. and Mrs. Wong and their two children moved in. This was to be the real test of the design. The family initially were very happy with the flat since they were spared the expense of decorating. They were given the first six months at reduced rent with the stipulation they could not change anything and would allow the team access to follow up on the design performance. When the Wongs moved in, to this ready-designed home, they were faithful to the original agreement and brought with them no furniture or fittings, only their personal possessions.

"Because this was an agreement and a promise. When we first came here we couldn’t bring anything in..... We only brought blankets, sheets and some clothes. Furniture and other stuff was not allowed".

Within the first month the family found they could not live in the flat the way it was and pleaded with the design team to be allowed to change things. After three months they took the matter into their own hands.

Accompanied by one of the designers who had participated in the project, Lee Tak Chi, I visited the Wong family for the first follow up visit in over 14 years. Since 1981, Tai Wai itself has changed considerably from rural village to new town and the estate itself had become built up, and was surrounded by many new housing estates.

Although I was forewarned the space would be nothing like the photographs taken in 1981, I was shocked at the difference. (Plate 3) Inside, the flat was barely recognisable from

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1 One of the Canadian team members had encountered such a system in South America and suggested that it might be appropriate in this context.
2 The Hong Kong team were flown to Canada to be interviewed about the project on Canadian Chinese television. The ultimate accolade was a visit to the flat by the Governor’s wife.
3 Interview with the Wong family April 1995.
4 Lee Tak Chi recalled how every time he attempted a follow-up visit he felt obliged to come bearing presents to keep the family friendly. But, their annoyance with both the design and the intrusion into their lives made these visits increasingly difficult and he soon had to give up.
5 Lung Hang estate in Tai Wai. Authorised population 18,903 comprising Slab, Double H and Twin Tower blocks.
the neat, indeed spartan, space in the original photographs. The room was packed with an eclectic mix of bulky furniture. There seemed to be things everywhere: on the beds, on the chairs, above the cabinets, in the cabinets, and under the sofa; every surface was covered.

The family had retained the original flooring, and the partitioned room but the lighting was changed from spotlights to strip fluorescents which made everything stand out in sharp contrast. The streamlined modular furniture system had been replaced by new, locally bought furniture and the team’s innovative plenum wall feature had long since gone. It was recognised, well before the six month trial was up, to be a complete failure. The family confessed they were “afraid” to use it: it harboured cockroaches, wasted valuable inches and failed as a viable ventilation system. By comparison, the Wong’s own solution to the ventilation problem was much more simple: three large wall fans at high level, supplemented by a window-mounted air conditioner. Perhaps, not so inventive, or as streamlined as the plenum wall, but infinitely more effective.

The Wongs had clearly rejected the ready-made design and were more comfortable living in a space they had appropriated themselves. Lee Tak Chi admitted the team failed to predict how much patterns of lifestyle would change, they did not, for example, imagine that air conditioning units would become commonplace even in low-income households. We can also infer, from the outset, the team had in mind the idea of a cohesive style that would incorporate all domestic needs neatly within a multipurpose system. While this might have seemed like a clever solution in reality it did not fit with the way Hong Kong people, and the Wongs in particular, were used to living.

Unfortunately, the delightful image of family breakfasts on the balcony was not to be. The Hong Kong climate made it much too hot in summer, and too cold in Winter. And, unlike an empty show-flat this family had so many belongings they had to make use of every available space for storage which meant the balcony became completely filled up with laundry and general household items.

The concept of a slot-in modular system greatly appealed to the design team (and other

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A fan located on the balcony was supposed to blow air behind the plenum wall. At various points there were ventilation openings along the plenum wall which, at a flick of a switch, would release a blast of cool air. In reality it only filtered more warm air into the flat.

When tenants were allowed to install air-conditioners they had to install them in the window between the balcony and living area which meant that the return air would make the balcony even hotter in summer.

All their survey data was directed towards the design of a modular system. The team had a preconceived idea (even before they started the research) that this system would be the most efficient system.
designers) but here the designers made the mistake of presuming the Hong Kong family would want to change their whole attitude to dwelling and could adapt to using space in this way.

The idea was that the family could simply add, remove and alter storage within the home to suit their needs. And, if they felt they needed another cupboard they could simply "build" it to the same design as the others. But as Lee Tak Chi admitted, they misjudged the family's ability and interest in persevering with a system that was not only troublesome, but as it turned out, unrealistically time-consuming to produce. And, although this system was designed to be inexpensive it ignored the fact that most commercial furniture available locally is already designed to provide maximum storage for high density living and comes in a variety of styles to suit all tastes. The modular system effectively removed the family's freedom to respond to changing consumption trends and to make their own choices.

Fundamentally, the team failed to predict the family's storage requirements. In retrospect it may seem strange that the Hong Kong team members, as cultural insiders, did not draw from their own experience of high density living to provide a more accurate interpretation of the research data. But, it seems that the full extent of the problem did not come across in the questionnaire and yet they trusted to this method of quantitative, proven data rather than through experience or by observation. Although each of the Hong Kong team members would have been aware that Hong Kong people tend to accumulate a lot of belongings they chose to ignore this. Or, they had decided that this could be solved through a well-designed furniture system which would presumably encourage people to be neat and tidy and, if there was only limited storage, the family would minimise their belongings. Basically, the team failed to notice how much consumption was part of the Hong Kong lifestyle, and intrinsically part of the Hong Kong household. Unlike, for example, the Japanese, the Hong Kong family does not apparently reduce, or adapt their consumption level to high density living. The Japanese have adapted to living in small spaces through a very ordered existence. Hong Kong people appear to be more casual about the way their home is ordered. The modular system was designed to help put order into people's lives but it did not question whether Hong Kong people could adjust to this particular form of imposed order.

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The wall was used as the back of the cupboard resulting in a three-sided cupboard suspended off the wall. This certainly made it cheaper but it was not as strong as a conventional four-sided cupboard and as a prototype was shoddily constructed.
The Wongs did not consider that they had any more belongings than any other family. At first sight the Wongs’ home appears to be totally chaotic, a random jumbled arrangement of furniture and clothing. But, it is in fact ordered towards different activities and functions that suit the family needs. Everything is close at hand and convenient. It is arranged to be practical, with a degree of privacy and comfort for each family member, with the television in one corner and separate study areas for each child built into their beds. To a designer, however, the Wongs’ spatial representation appears illogical and uncoordinated, lacking fundamental aesthetic sensibility or indeed any cohesive style. In terms of a critical design appreciation it would be appear to be a classic case of a space in need of good design organisation. But the Wongs’ flat is a before and after story with a difference. Instead of the designers providing the solution they provided the problems which the Wongs had to solve. The designers saw only the problems of density and failed to understand the relationship between the way Hong Kong people like to, or are used to living. They researched the problem of density, but they did not understand it had various forms. Within their design analysis, the designers relied on a method based on design universals that ignored local sensibilities of spatial experience.

Design Knowledge

As design failures go, the Wongs’ flat was neither particularly costly or significant. Designers may argue that they could not provide for a family that refused to accept any spatial order. But were the Wongs’ really so anarchic in their disposition of space? They themselves referred to their practice of displaying objects as a method that was “popular” in Hong Kong and talked specifically of the Hong Kong situation and the problems, and preferences of “every Hong Kong family”. Clearly, they identified with other Hong Kong people and felt that their negotiation of the space was nothing different from what other Hong Kong families would do in the same situation.

This example of the Wong family raises many questions about design in high density domestic space. There must be valid reasons for its failure. In this instance, the designers’ inability to find an adequate design response might be attributed to the failure of design method to work effectively within high density space. Designers may argue that it is not possible to design for every eventuality and yet they were quite confident about imposing a system that they believed would be an appropriate design response. They were so

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12 A custom-made locally produced design that incorporates the bed, storage and desk.
focused on the residents’ spatial practice they paid little regard to their sensibility to high density living.

If the designers had a more useful knowledge of Hong Kong space they might have anticipated the problem but the team firmly believed that their design method would provide relevant data which could then be analysed, and developed into a viable design solution. They assumed, that the Wongs would see the benefit of this design and could accept these imposed ideas and would change their spatial habits. What they did not appreciate was the complexity of the problem or the tenant’s interface with the homespace.

Clearly the gap between designer’s and resident’s knowledge of high density space lies more with designers and not with the residents who, presumably, must have a detailed knowledge of high density space. The fact that even the local designers could ignore their own knowledge of high density living shows how much the activity of designing, through a design method, relies on western spatial assumptions. But, spatial experience that is derived from high density living must be a legitimate spatial knowledge. And, while high density certainly reduces the scope for design it does not mean that residents’ own method of appropriating and thinking about space can be dismissed simply because the approach is not intelligible, as design, to designers.

Venturi et al found a similar challenge to design in looking at the urban sprawl of the Las Vegas Strip. They suggested that a designer can learn from every kind of space if they able to look nonjudgementally. It is only through ignorance that designers are ill-equipped to reflect on design by not seeing what is around them. By withholding judgement, this knowledge can be used as a tool to make more sensitive judgements later. When the work was first published the authors were criticised for their lack of social responsibility and scepticism from the public and educational spheres, on the relevance of the everyday urban forms to the subject of design. The survival of these forms is testimony to the importance of recognising the potential for insight and knowledge in the everyday. The endurance of this text, now over twenty years old, shows how design is an appropriate strategy for interpreting the context of commonplace spatial forms. Despite the breakthroughs of this research and the growing acceptance of less mainstream theory there has been some hesitancy in applying this sort of thinking to contemporary Hong Kong domestic spaces. The reasons for this might be complicated by the dominance of western design theory and criticism based on lower density spatial norms. These spaces
have been ignored on two accounts: as domestic spaces (private) and as high density space. There might also be an element of over-sensitivity in being seen to glorify poverty, and thereby demeaning the respect of low-income families. In this study I am not insensitive to the problems of density. And, it is not because I want to patronise these residents, their home or Hong Kong with eurocentric assumptions. But, rather that I am conscious of the spatial limitations within these homes and feel that residents have a knowledge of space that should be articulated as design knowledge. Residents have no illusions about the quality of their homes but they are able to talk about the space with experience and knowledge. In this respect they are aware they are an authority on density.

There has been so little documented about the way Hong Kong people construct their homespace the assumption is that they do not think about it or indeed, that there is nothing to think about. We might in part, admire the Wongs’ sense of freedom from conventional design principles but that it is not to say that the space was not ordered.

The issue here seems to lie in the way residents and designers conceive of design in high density space - as space, their knowledge of space and the way in which that knowledge is articulated.

But, with an open mind (on post-occupancy studies, for example) design offers a strategy for acknowledging articulating and legitimising the ways in which people use high density space. As Coyne and Snodgrass\(^\text{10}\) point out, it is not the actual practice of design that is mysterious but the aura of design as a creative practice that is assumed within the profession, or rather, by the professionals.

If there is any mystery in design thinking then it is a mystery shared by thinking within all areas of expertise. There is a strong historical tradition that permits us to apply metaphors of mystery to design thinking and to art, whereas similar license is not granted within other areas.\(^\text{10}\)

Donald Schön argues that design thinking is such a part of everyday life that we fail to be conscious how it affects our everyday responses and actions. He calls this knowing-in-action. It is revealed as intelligent action by “spontaneous, skilful execution of the

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\(^\text{10}\) *Ibid.*, p. 127
performance", but, characteristically we are unable to make it "verbally explicit". We know we know it but it is difficult to explain how, or why.

When we go about the spontaneous, intuitive performance of the actions of everyday life, we show ourselves to be knowledgeable in a special way. Often we cannot say what it is we know. When we try to describe it we find ourselves at a loss, or we produce descriptions that are obviously inappropriate. Our knowing is ordinarily tacit, implicit in our patterns of action and in our feel for the stuff with which we are dealing. It seems right to say that our knowing is in our action.16

The problem with describing knowing-in-action is that it is must be explicated as a construction of something that is spontaneous, of the world as we see it. Language distorts the dynamics of knowing-in-action by forcing a translation of something that is tacit into a communicable knowledge.

Knowing suggests the dynamic quality of knowing-in-action, which, when we describe it, we convert to knowledge-in-action.17

What people think and know about the design of their homes might be very different from how they express this to others. It is as if they are, in fact describing knowing-in-action rather than the knowledge itself.

To stop and think, and consider the problem that cannot be dealt with through the routine responses of knowing-in-action is something that both trained designers and non-designers do. This process of learning how to design is described by Schön as learning to think like a designer,18 to reflect-in-action.

The problem with designers' way of thinking about domestic space is that, as outsiders, they may be looking too hard for the answers and not looking hard enough at the overall context of the problem - or the problem as the residents' see it. Designers are on unfamiliar territory when dealing with domestic space. They attempt to make sense of the problem that is presented to them, and which, characteristically, they will try to make fit within the framework of their professional knowledge. But, the problem that is presented, or which the problem as they see it may not be the real problem.

18 Ibid., p. 34
Home, Buttimer suggests, is a process of centering created by the people themselves. Insiders may be so immersed in their everyday life they may not see the point in questioning home in its wider and spatial context. If they do not have to think about it, they may not know how to articulate it. As Buttimer notes:

The meanings of place to those who live in them have more to do with everyday living and doing rather than thinking. 19

Primarily, as Buttimer shows that there is a fundamental contrast between the insider's experiences of places and the outsider's conventional ways of describing them. She discovered in her own research that she was prevented from appreciating what residents were saying because she had been filtering this through her own sense of space.

It was clear that those habits and preferences which had deepest roots in people's memories were also those which were likely to survive and many of those were not really plannable....Even though residents spoke about "home ground" and "sense of place," I heard those words through the filters of my own experience. "home" for me should ideally have those qualities of my own home ...These Glasgow housewives would probably have felt uncomfortable in such a milieu. For them the bustle of street life, the regular whistle of factory and train, the occasional gang fight and football match - these would probably have been more important than the presence of cows or birds. 20

Clearly such deep-rooted temporal practices would not be revealed through a quantitative questionnaire. It is doubtful that these preferences could be easily articulated within a qualitative interview or a casual chat. Buttimer exposes the problem of assuming that spatial sensibilities are universal but if these are not articulated how can an outsider ever presume to solve design problems which, it seems can never be fully understood, planned for and/or solved by an outsider?

Designing Space

How does a cultural insider see high density space? Do they see it in terms of design problem or as an everyday space or simultaneously as both? How does their knowledge of space affect their design process and design response?

19 Anne Buttimer, "Home, Reach, And the Sense of Place' in Anne Buttimer, & David Seamon (eds.) The Human Experience of Space and Place, London: Croom Helm, 1980 Buttimer, p.171
20 Ibid., p. 179
It would be expected that a space designed by professional designers should work better than a space designed by someone who is not a designer. It should be better, but that is not to say that it is always better. A professional designer, trained in the practice of space, should possess a reflective knowledge that can usefully be applied towards the interpretation of space. They should be more sensitive to distinguishing between conventions of design and idiosyncratic spatial practice. They should be able to articulate this knowledge. But if idiosyncratic practice is itself a form of design knowledge what use is this knowledge within design?

Schön talks about a professional way of seeing the world and suggests that designers should reflect more on the acquisition of that knowledge. Arguably, the people most affected by the acquisition and recognition of spatial knowledge in Hong Kong are not the residents of density, but the local design practitioners and students of interior design. Students are being educated for a professional career, requiring a professional knowledge to help them with the practice of design. Does an education in design add to, or replace, their existing design knowledge? In a recent project I asked Year Three students of the HKPU BA (Hons) in Interior Design to reflect on this problem.

What have I learned about space?
What is my knowledge of space?
How do I know what I know about space?

In this project I asked them to reflect on their professional knowledge as a way of seeing the world rather than as a means of creating a design product. Most of all I wanted them to acknowledge how far they had shifted from an everyday spatial knowledge, which they might apply at home, towards a well articulated design knowledge they would apply within their project work.

The students confronted the dilemma of using design concepts that were theoretically sound (from a western point of view) but which simply could not apply in the everyday local context. They looked at different types of everyday spaces to consider qualities that they as insiders contributed to make Hong Kong space. They then had to reflect on how this related to their knowledge of space. As an exercise in soul-searching and cultural identity it put them outside the safety net of design knowledge applied through the practice of design. It was especially difficult for them to resolve the quality and representation of everyday Hong Kong spaces of density to their acquired knowledge of space through the recognised practice of interior design.
In this thesis I am asking myself the same questions. As a teacher of design the issues are not just personal but have a bearing on how I view the education of these Hong Kong designers. To create designers from non-designers any design programme will seek to shift students’ everyday knowledge towards an acceptable method of thinking about and practising design. For students to acquire professional knowledge, they need to learn to think like designers: designers who think in terms of western spatial theory and practice. Schön describes the process of learning to design thus:

Swimming in unfamiliar waters, the student risks the loss of his sense of competence, control, and confidence. He must temporarily abandon much that he already values. If he comes to the studio with knowledge he considers useful, he may be asked to unlearn it. If he comes with a perspective on what is valuable for design, he may be asked to put it aside. Later in his studio education, or after it, he may judge for himself what he wishes to keep, discard or combine, but he is at first unable to make such a judgement. And he may fear that, by a kind of insidious coercion, he may permanently lose what he already knows and values.

The predicament is thus: the student needs to be able to learn about design through designing. As he learns to design he discovers that he seems to know nothing. He refers to the tutor for guidance. But the tutor cannot tell the student what it is he needs to know, the student must judge for himself what knowledge he wants to “keep, discard or combine”.

The question is, does the student of design “temporarily abandon” what he already values, or is this permanent? Is the knowledge that he already has useful or not? Is what he learns about designing, and about space, only a potted version of the tutor’s own view?

But students already know this. They know that they respond to space on two levels. Their knowledge of space operates comfortably between the two worlds. As designers they see their role to improve the quality and experience of space. But at home they may be living with problems of high density that cannot be solved through a formal design method - but which appears to work well in their everyday experience.

The Epistemology of Space

This study began with personal anxieties about the replication of design universals in design education and the nature of design in the everyday Hong Kong environment.

Here, I am arguing that design knowledge exists within other levels of knowledge. Secondly, that high density domestic spaces are the product of legitimate design knowledge. But the question remains is it possible to make explicit that which is implicit in every day spatial representation? Is it possible to articulate a knowledge which most people might not be aware they have? To begin to answer these questions this research must start with an open mind that this knowledge, which must be articulated through language, is only the surface of something deeper. The difficulty here is in knowing, and articulating, exactly what this might be.

But how will you look for something when you don't know what it is. How on earth are you going to set up something you don't know as the object of your search? To put it another way, even if you come right up against it, how will you know that what you have found is the thing you didn't know?

The hypothesis is that physically represented space reflects the residents' spatial knowledge. To better understand spatial representation of high density space as a representational space, the visibility and spatial relationship of the physical elements and material culture should be interpreted through the residents view: by what they say, and indeed, what they do not say about their homespace. This means a shift from a designer's knowledge of space, to what the residents think about space. To extract this deeper-rooted spatial knowledge of physical space there is only the skin of language, through which subjects describe their surroundings. As Lefebvre points out, it is not that language has priority over space but that language articulates communicable aspects of space that have remained hidden.

Closely bound up with Western "culture", this ideology stresses speech and overemphasises the written word, to the detriment of the social practice which it is indeed designed to conceal. In any event, the spoken and written word are taken for (social) practice; it is assumed that absurdity and obscurity, which are treated as aspects of the same thing, may be dissipated without any corresponding disappearance of the "object". Thus communication brings the non-communicated into the realm of the communicated - the incomunicable having no existence beyond that of an ever-pursued residue. Such are the assumptions of an ideology which, in positing the transparency of space, identifies knowledge, information and communication.

The diffidence that most Hong Kong people appear to have towards their homes it seems can be attributed in part to a knowledge that everyone, within their community, shares a

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similar experience. A cultural outsider recognises this as a knowledge that is only common to those who share the experience of the culture, whereas to a cultural insider articulating this knowledge may appear to be stating the obvious. But, as Geertz explains, in order to understand a culture, we must look to everyday life to see what it is that people take for granted.

Understanding a people's culture exposes their normalness without reducing their particularity... it renders them accessible: setting them in the frame of their own banalities, it dissolves their opacity. 21

But, as Geertz suggests, it is this "normalness" which enriches the lived experience and it is what transforms a representation of space into a representational space. In short, getting at "normalness" is difficult for several reasons. And, though it might seem prosaic, instead of some grand theory, all that might be expected from a detailed study of everyday spatial knowledge, might be a host of banalities. First, residents view their homes as "taken for granted space" they are not used to viewing it from an objective position. Secondly, although they will be able to articulate what seems to them to be the most obvious response to a question they do not exactly know what it is the researcher wants to know. Thirdly, for the researcher, much of what the residents can articulate about every day experience of designing must be expected to be steeped in banalities making it more difficult to decipher potentially salient points.

It requires an open-ended qualitative research to be able to draw out banalities from unreliable memories, bearing in mind the point that even if we come right up against knowledge in its various forms, we might not recognise it. It is unlikely residents would ever choose to document banalities of everyday life, to have a clear idea of the sequence of events, or be able to clarify their methods of spatial reasoning. Domestic space is simultaneously affected by past and present. In this respect quantitative statistics and facts distract from the everyday spatial knowledge whereas social myths, gossip and old wives tales, localised narratives are more likely to be a significant part of everyday knowledge; as an interpretation of the facts.

Culturally Imagined Space

According to Agriculture and Fisheries Department Statistics, a large dog needs about 7.4 square metres of living space, while a public housing tenant often has only about 5.5 square metres of living space... 22

22 *Eastern Express*, November 11th, 1995
Density is normally assumed to have negative connotations. But, as Lefebvre26 points out, to use the pathology of density argument suggests that the so-called "doctors of space" - architects, planners and interior designers - spread "mystifying notions" that they have the knowledge to somehow solve the problems of a society which cannot cope on its own.

The assumptions made about density in the West appears to be contradicted by Hong Kong which has some of the densest urban areas in the world, yet is not plagued with the same social problems as other cities. Until this knowledge of density is unpacked it will continue to be overlooked as legitimate space by the dominance of Western spatial theory and norms.

Space in virtually any shape and form in Hong Kong is seen as a valuable and luxurious commodity. In a place where usable space may be little more than a narrow gap, an underpass or a ledge and where tight, dense spaces are the familiar everyday spaces people will shrug and say "this is Hong Kong".

In a city where shops might be located in the space under a staircase, where the Urban Services Department have created recreational sitting out areas comprising a lonely bench on a vacant building lot and where some of the most popular cafés comprise a few folding stools and tables on the corner of a busy street, any concept of what is good, acceptable, desirable and attainable in spatial terms is relative to the kind of spaces that are available. In Hong Kong urban planning works because it is ingrained in the verticality of the society, in the way of life where local spatial knowledge is comprised of partial views, crowds and the constraints, boundaries and blocks of high rise living.

The high concentration of people in urban areas makes crowds a feature of everyday life and the lack of urban space puts Hong Kong rents among the highest in the world. For the majority, this means affordable living spaces are small27. Hong Kong people share a legacy of living in high density. It is through spatial experience that the Hong Kong cultural imaginary links the community so that density is naturally part of everyday life and, unlike expatriates, Hong Kong people are bound to this spatial knowledge not just by the present but by their past experience.

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26 Henri Lefebvre, _op. cit._
27 The Building Department assistant director remarks there is nothing in the building ordinance to prevent developers building "gnat-sized" flats some of which are no bigger than 100 sq. feet. One flat had a living area of 55 sq. feet, another only 43 sq. feet. See _South China Morning Post_, October 18th, 1994
Redolent with imaginary and symbolic elements, they have their source in history - in the history of a people as well as in the history of each individual belonging to that people.28

Lefebvre reminds us that representational spaces, the space of "inhabitants and users", need to obey no rules of consistency or cohesiveness. Representational Hong Kong spaces are therefore lived through its associated images and symbols tending towards "more or less coherent systems of non-verbal symbols and signs". Hong Kong seems to break widely accepted rules of spatial convention and spatial representation. It is not unusual, for example, to see a brand new Lexus, the epitome of luxurious vehicle engineering, being driven about with the seven dwarfs arranged along the rear window. Or a Chinese restaurant/cafe that uses the street as a washing up/scullery space - a contravention to urban planning in most western countries, but not in Asia. The urban services codes are constantly stretched. Hong Kong people seem to have the capacity to make themselves at home and to transform almost any space. The space under one open-air bus terminus in Wanchai, for example, has been appropriated into a comfortable home-like environment complete with a sofa, dining table, fridge and artwork on the wall.

As Lefebvre points out, although space can be described as an inventory of what exists in space and may generate discourse on space, it cannot give rise to knowledge of space. Without this knowledge we must resort to the level of discourse to transfer a social space to mental space. It is assumed that there is a relationship between the two, but he queries any justification within the spatial realm that the "known and the transparent" are the same. Living every day with density and living as part of the culture of density must contribute to the individual's everyday spatial knowledge however this knowledge may be more difficult to articulate if the individual is not aware either of its existence or significance.

It is one thing to identify different visible representations of space, or to distinguish between space that is lived, perceived or conceived but how is this a useful knowledge? Lefebvre explains, knowledge is better than ignorance since to know more about what is, will help us to understand more about what is likely to be.

The real knowledge that we hope to attain would have a retrospective as well as a prospective import. Its implications for history, for example, and for our understanding of time, will become apparent if our hypothesis turns out to be correct. It will help us to grasp how societies generate their (social) space and time - their representational space and their

28 Henri Lefebvre, *op. cit.*, p. 41
representations of space. This would allow us, not to foresee the future, but to bring relevant factors to bear on the future in prospect - on the project, in other words of another space and another time in another (possible or impossible) society.29

It has been the Hong Kong Government’s aim to continue to improve on housing standards to encourage home ownership and upgrade or demolish older style housing blocks. But despite these moves in the immediate future it is the older housing blocks that will continue to house the majority of Hong Kong people. There is clearly a need to legitimise how this knowledge is represented and to address the real knowledge behind high density spatial representation. In doing so, the focus of this thesis will be to shift design knowledge from the forms of density and what a designer knows about space, to what non-designers know about high density space.

The continued growth in the economy, a wider range of better quality HKHA flats and a developing new middle class have created a new interest in home decoration. Most new residents take this opportunity to re-evaluate their lifestyle, personal taste and style of furnishing and consciously to acquire a new style of living which they can articulate as design.

A lot of people are much more willing than us. The materials they use are better quality. We ...we’re just ordinary. Now when you look around our neighbours, they’re great, really. We’re not the only ones. Maybe it’s because you think our colours ...lighter, comfortable, do you? But colours ...it depends on what people like.30

Clearly, residents of the new, lower density flats are in a freer position than long-term residents of older flats to think about design and to express this as design knowledge. But, as one resident found this also gave them a perspective on the problems of their previous home.

And I have a feeling that...we ..now we have less family quarrels than before. In the past, it was crowded and we had to “give way ” to each other. But now...eh, we have a larger place, more space for everyone. And there are fewer fights.31

Unless long-term residents consciously decide to have a complete change of decor, design decision-making would be spread over time, in response to different acquisitions, and changing family needs. If they have only ever lived at high density they may be less

29 Ibid., pp.91-2
30 Pilot Study 3
31 Pilot Study 3
conscious of decisions they might have made or how these familiar routines are affected by high density living.

In the past changing clothes was a funny business. We took a handful of clothes with us into the bathroom. It was small, in the So Uk estate, and the clothes dropped onto the floor. Now it's not the same. Now, although it's small, at least we have a room. Close the door and you can change your clothes any way you want, right?

In a new home former values may change or be suppressed. Design knowledge is clearly not static. But is it enough to identify that there is a design knowledge when it is evident that this has a limited shelf life? Is it even useful to begin to expose these patterns of spatial representation when they are changing so fast?

As Lefebvre points out, real knowledge must have a retrospective as well as prospective import. Clearly, residents' existing design knowledge must develop from past knowledge of space based on the higher density dwelling. If we are to understand what he calls "relevant factors" then it is appropriate to explore the base of real spatial knowledge; to expose design knowledge within a high density context.

This study contributes to the (emerging) discipline of design knowledge with new insight into high density domestic space. But there are still questions that need to be addressed about whether Hong Kong people, have developed a sensibility to high density living as a relatively homogeneous population or whether these spatial practices are culturally derived. To test this theory further I interviewed families living in Northern Ireland and Scotland. First I wanted to see how Hong Kong immigrants would represent their home overseas, and secondly how they had adapted to living in a different domestic form. On a personal note, it was valuable to me to compare how Hong Kong families, who were long-term immigrants, had adapted to a domestic form with which I was familiar from my own cultural background but, where I have not lived in over ten years.

All the families worked long hours in the restaurant trade returning home very late at night whereupon they would watch Hong Kong television, via cable. Through the media they were able to maintain a link to a place they had not lived for twenty or thirty years but which was still an important part of their lives, because of relatives still living there and the deeper emotional tie of the emigrant. One woman commented that she could not stand to live in a small flat such as her mother in law's 500 sq. feet flat in Tai Po. For each of these emigrant families it was important for them to own their own home, preferably a

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2 Pilot Study 3
detached house, which they saw as a good investment and gave them more privacy from their neighbours. They were visibly proud to have achieved a lifestyle they would not have had if they had stayed in Hong Kong where, they felt, it would be impossible for them to own business a big home and a car.

Two of the families admitted they had not changed the decor which they had inherited from the previous owner. They were too busy, and as reluctant do-it-yourself practitioners appeared to be unenthusiastic to expend too much effort in the up-keep of their home and garden. In Hong Kong, where “time is money” they felt it was easier to hire someone do this sort of work. They were surrounded by familiar consumer products imported from Hong Kong—an upright fan, rice cooker, Chinese art work, and cultural artefacts - which featured more prominently here than in Hong Kong. Most families laughed at the suggestion that they followed fung-shui practices - these were not followed faithfully.

While a sample of only five interviews cannot be truly representative of the way Hong Kong British based families view the world, it opens up the idea of prevailing ethnic practices of spatial representation and the extent to which spatial knowledge and design knowledge are affected by the individual’s immediate spatial environment and how much it is encultured? It shows that Hong Kong people adapt well to living in a bigger space, in a different cultural and spatial environment and appreciate the value of space in their homes both as a personal asset and as a reflection of their status.

Would a local Indian family, for example, living in Hong Kong public housing, have the same spatial response? One such family that I interviewed who had just moved into a new flat were proud to talk about their new home. Inside there were the familiar custom-made and ready-made pieces of furniture. The same black sofa and glass coffee table purchased locally. The same large television, which was kept on throughout the interview. The only difference here was in the representation of material culture and in the choice of colours, which seemed to be stronger than the pastel shades favoured by many Hong Kong Chinese. But these new residents might also have been influenced by the design of the show flat. And, as a low-income family, and Cantonese speakers, they would have

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35 Some items had been specially brought back from Hong Kong, others were purchased at the local Chinese supermarket
34 One family had a friend who was skilled in fung-shui practices. It was pointed to them that it was bad fung-shui to have the staircase facing the door. Instead of turning it round - which would have meant considerable re-modelling of the house, they were advised to plant a large leafy plant in front of the door.
One household pointed out their “money plant” - a common household plant which I also found in my mother’s and aunt’s homes known under a different name.
33 HKHA flats are occupied almost exclusively by Hong Kong Chinese but a limited number are occupied by long-term Hong Kong Indian families with local citizenship.
been likely to shop in local furniture shops, and exposed to local Hong Kong interpretations of design through television. If they had been better off, if they had been living in a smaller flat, or if they were first generation immigrants then the spatial representation might have been different.

This study is not an anthropological survey of Hong Kong spatial representation. I have not lived in these flats (with or without a Hong Kong family) nor have I set about learning the language or immersing myself in the Chinese cultural history and traditions. As a cultural outsider I recognise there is a danger in reading too much into a space without understanding the context, but feel that as an outsider I can maintain objectivity about spatial interpretation where a cultural insider may be so involved in the culture they might not be able to distinguish norms of everyday life. Schön cites Vickers' comment that in our judgements of qualities of things it is easier to recognise and describe deviations from the norm than it is to describe the norm itself. The cultural insider therefore, may describe deviations to their norm, whereas a cultural outsider is in a position to take an overall perspective of what they see as a cultural insider's norm.

On the strength of my study of design in Hong Kong homes, I was invited to create a model flat for a major exhibition of Hong Kong housing staged in Edinburgh. The flat was to be modelled on the Hong Kong Housing Authority's (HKHA) latest homeownership block, The Concord. I had to predict how an aspiring middle class family, who had been living in an old-style flat might choose to decorate their new home. I discovered this was not as easy to do as I had thought.

The HKHA were very nervous about this project. They wanted to show design, as the way forward: a show flat minus all the clutter of lifestyle, including all reference to cultural artefacts to make it look like an ideal designed home anywhere in the world. My brief was to make this space look like a Hong Kong home. Which, I understood meant that it should reflect the local taste, aesthetics and the everyday spatial practice of Hong Kong people.

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*Donald A. Schön, op. cit., 1987, p. 23-4

7 The exhibition was a joint effort between the HKHA and HK Arts Centre. I was invited by the HK Arts Centre to curate the model flat.

* The HKHA had already built a show flat for their Housing the Millions exhibition which they wanted to duplicate for this exhibition. This show flat was built to project and perhaps, to educate the public about a new way of living and deliberately omitted all reference to existing local habitus. Visitors to the flat would be impressed by the vision of a universal designed lifestyle which in reality bore no relation to their own way of life.
One important aspect about this project was the opportunity it gave me to put my knowledge of Hong Kong homes into practice. Instead of relying on the discourse of space I could test my own sensitivity to space by appropriating this flat as my interpretation of Hong Kong design knowledge. How would an aspiring middle class family with two children decorate this space? Where would they shop? What kind of lighting would they use? What spatial qualities, materials and elements would make this recognisable as a Hong Kong home? What part does material culture play in the Hong Kong home?

Somewhere in the middle of these questions lies the scope for design research. Clearly many of the issues within design overlap other academic fields such as anthropology, sociology, geography and psychology; the boundaries between the disciplines are not fixed, there are mutual cross-disciplinary interests. In order to contribute to this emerging field of design knowledge, to unpack the place of design in density, requires the use of methods developed within other fields so we might build a narrative of insight into density.

Hong Kong Domestic Space

Perhaps we are simple people...Yeah we are...We...because we lived in poor conditions...y'know. Then we were suddenly moved from a poor condition to a good one. As human beings, we felt really happy, right?...We didn't have a bath tub, a kitchen, a big bathroom before. It was so small.39

Yeah.. perhaps we used to live ...to live in the living room. actually the living room and the bedroom were one and the same. We ate and slept in the same place, was that a real home? When I saw the property ads outside, wow, the living room and the bedrooms all separated. Y'know I envied them.40

For reasons of economy and easy maintenance the HKHA purposely (and proudly) designed their flats to be small and featureless,41 perhaps for this reason, very little is known about them as a post-occupancy interior space. What little knowledge there is

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39 Pilot Study 3 - mother
40 Pilot Study 3 - son
41 See: Hong Kong Housing Authority Annual Report, 1962-3, p 16.

"The Authority's estates, generally, consist of multi-storey reinforced concrete blocks of single room self-contained flats varying from seven to twenty storeys in height. Site layouts usually provide for 25% - 27% site coverage, and planned densities of up to 2,000 persons per acre are developed. Finishings, both external and internal are as simple as possible, or eliminated altogether, to a point where the structure itself represents about 65% of the total cost of the building."
tends to be lost by the dominant focus of home as housing. Historically, Hong Kong has always suffered from a shortage of land for building housing. This phenomenon of density, and poverty has tended to distract attention from the experience of dwelling. After the famous Shek Kip Mei fire, of 1953, the laissez-faire Government was forced to implement a housing scheme to accommodate this population who had made Hong Kong their home. For the majority of the population, the prohibitive cost of private housing makes Government housing the only alternative. As the Territory's biggest single landlord the HKHA's strictly enforced system of space allocation has been instrumental in setting an attainable standard for personal space, at a density that would generally not be acceptable in the west, within estates built to an equivalent population of a sizeable UK town. The history of built spaces clearly affects the way Hong Kong spaces have evolved and in turn has contributed to the sensibility to space stemming from this experience. While there have been many histories written of Hong Kong which refer to housing, there is none that looks specifically at the home, its evolution and representation of space.

Sociological surveys and studies carried out on Hong Kong housing provide useful statistical data on social groups but add little to our understanding of the compact between the individual and their homespace. Architectural studies have concentrated on the development of the building form or estate but the interior, if it is indicated at all, tends to be shown only in a two-dimensional plan view. The Hong Kong home has become a forgotten space; too small to be interesting, too ordinary and ubiquitous to be significant. Typically, Hong Kong low-income families may not have considered they would have had very much in their homes to document; certainly nothing that was any different from anyone else. By virtue of its humble status the post-occupancy public housing interior space was never considered worthy enough to be a subject for design either by cultural insiders or outsiders.

For the cultural outsider, the Hong Kong homespace is an enigma, pieced together from fragmented impressions from the media, and where the density and quality of interior design is pre-judged by the external image of the architecture.

Traditionally, good architecture has been judged to be that which has given convincing forms to the myth of the harmonious life, and bad architecture that which has failed to do so.

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24 Currently the waiting list for HKHA rental flats stands at 150,000 - see South China Morning Post, March 25th 1997
There would be few people, least of all the HKHA, who could claim these older housing blocks as "good architecture". If they are judged to be "bad architecture" should high density and a lack of facilities automatically suggest an "unharmonious life"? Without inside knowledge it is clear we cannot always pre-judge the qualities of a space based on western design standards without questioning the relevance of this criteria from the residents own experience of the space. In the west, overcrowding and design, or rather bad design, has been made culpable, or at least is seen to have a major effect on the health and behaviour of residents. In Hong Kong where most of the population lives in, what is by western standards poor quality, high density housing, the crime rate is among the lowest in the world and social studies have so far found no consistent findings to support the pathology of density argument.⁴⁵

Attention needs to be shifted from the homes as a high density space to the home as a lived-in space, to consider the individual's experience of living with density. As Forty points out, individual people experience space in many different ways.

To concentrate exclusively on the making of architecture is to miss the point that architecture, like all other cultural objects, is not made just once, but is made and remade over and over again each time it is represented through another medium, each time its surroundings change, each time different people experience it.⁴⁶

Over the lifecycle, within different generations, across different genders, the homespace is bound to have different interpretations and meaning. Long-term dwelling creates an intimate, experience of a space where everyday experiences, and knowledge, may change, develop and even be forgotten so that spaces may be shaped, represented and experienced through multiple, competing and even contradictory meanings.

How many homes would it take to be representative of all HKHA rental homes in this category? In this design research I am looking to articulate a knowledge of density through fifteen families who are long-term residents of an older style HKHA home. These respondents were a mix of friends of friends, snowballed connections, and referrals. My intention here is to ask wide ranging epistemological questions about residents' experience and representation of high density homespace; questions which have not been asked before in the context of design research. I am not seeking to conduct direct comparisons

between homes or families. None of these homes is considered in detail though some will be discussed more than others.

This study is a thick description supported by wide ranging historical, visual, oral and anecdotal data providing a holistic interpretation of density. There are no guarantees that the interview transcripts are what respondents meant to say, or would say if they were asked the same questions one year or even one week later. There is no hard factual data on this knowledge only an interpretation of what is an incommunicable and indeterminant knowledge which has existed as a gap in our understanding of space, density and design.
CHAPTER 1

SENSIBILITIES TO HONG KONG SPACE
Official Discourse

Before the British arrived it is said Hong Kong Island only had three temples and a couple of tumble down Chinese houses. At a time when Canton, Shanghai and Macau were lively and significant trading places, it might have been difficult to believe that this remote place would grow to become such an important and densely populated centre of South East Asia.

When the British flag was raised at Possession Point on Hong Kong island, on 20th January 1841, the fate of this small island quickly shifted from oblivion. Opportunities for trade and development soon attracted foreign merchants and a surge of Chinese labourers so that the population grew from an estimated 4,000 at occupation to three times that number just six months later. From the very beginning the price of Hong Kong land was expensive, with sites on the foreshore the most sought after and developers seized the opportunity to speculate and acquire land without reference to any authority, even though it was officially under the protection of the Crown. Indeed, one such merchant house, Jardine, Matheson and Company commenced building a large warehouse to store their goods, said to be the first European building in the colony, before they even had legal entitlement to the land. This prompted the British to introduce a system to control land that was then allotted at private auctions to the highest bidder through payment of annual rent. In June 1841 two hundred prime sites either side of Queen Road were sold. The rents for these were subsequently raised and, after an outcry, payment had to be changed to a single premium at a fixed rent. The early official view was that Hong Kong would be a

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1 A.R. Johnston, “Note on the Island of Hong Kong” in Barbara-Sue White (ed) Hong Kong: Somewhere Between Heaven and Earth, Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 28
2 See G.B. Endacott, A History of Hong Kong, Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1958, p. 65, Cites the Hong Kong Government Gazette of May 1841 which fixed the population as 7,450, 4,350 in the villages, 2,000 were boat people and the others visiting labourers and vendors - it has, however, been suggested that there are some discrepancies with this number and the figure might be closer to 5,650. Other figures estimate the population at cession to be 4,000, of which 1,500 were engaged in agriculture and 2,000 in fishing. see also: E.J. Eitel, Europe in China: The History From the Beginning to the Year 1882, Taipei: Ch'eng Wen publishing Co., 1968, originally Hong Kong: Kelly & Walsh, 1895 p. 134. Eitel claims the population comprised Puntis and Hakkas as the main land population, with Hoklos boat people, but never exceeded more than 2000 at any one time, ashore or afloat.
3 G.B. Endacott op. cit., p. 65. Endacott claims the local press estimated the population in October 1841 to be 15,000 Eitel op. cit., p. 183. By 1844, with rumours of a permanent settlement the Chinese population reached 19,000 including 1000 women and children.
4 Ratification of the Treaty of Nanking was not exchanged until 26 June 1843.
5 Anthony Walker and Stephen M. Rowlinson, The Building of Hong Kong: Constructing Hong Kong Through the Ages, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1990. p. 18-19
6 Ibid., p. 29 Captain Charles Elliot was keen to encourage merchant firms to set up on the island and promised them that he would urge the Government to allow the land to pass to them either after two years purchase or at a nominal rent. He wanted to create the impression of permanency for the settlement, but in doing so he over stepped his authority. However his terms were not
trading and military centre, rather than a colony, but the rapid growth in population created a need for accommodation, which the Government was happy to leave in the hands of private developers. Early accounts from this period attest to the speed of construction, and the demand, by the British, for accommodation of the highest level.

If you leave Hong Kong for a month, where you left a rock you find a drawing room in the height of Indian luxury—and a road where there was 20 feet of water.

The speed for change of construction, for which Hong Kong is noted today, is by no means a new phenomenon. As the settlement quickly developed there was then, as there is today, a great demand for housing with high rents charged for good quality accommodation.

Perhaps no place in the history of ages can boast of such a rapid rise as the town of Hong Kong. In August 1841, not one single house was yet built, not a portion of the brush-wood had been cleared away from this desolate spot. By June 1842, the town was considerably more than two miles long, containing store-houses and shops, here called godowns in which almost every article either Eastern or European could be procured and most of them at not very unreasonable prices.

Photographs of early Hong Kong show the grand colonial style facades of the Praya noted for its elegant arches and verandahs. The British built homes to a high architectural standard to fit a lifestyle that they had been used to in other parts of the Empire. These agreed by the Government much to the anger of the big trading companies. Later it was found that in their hurry to dispose of lots some were inaccurately surveyed.

If you have not already heard of the prices of land, you will be surprised at the sums drawn by the Government. A lease for seventy-five years only is granted, and for that £400 sterling per annum is a common rent for an imperial acre, many even higher. This too is given for lots that require an expenditure of from one to three thousand dollars to prepare a site for building on. Houses are scarce and let high, which is probably the cause of this high price; from twenty to thirty per cent is often got upon money so expended; but as a very great number are now building, rents may be expected to fall, and then the Government (sic) rent will be felt more burdensome. Victoria, 16th November, 1844

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were substantial structures built to withstand typhoons, amidst spacious surroundings with flowers and trees planted all around. The houses were opulent and grand constructed designed in a colonial style of verandahs, wrought iron balconies and coloured walls and built by Chinese coolie labourers who steadily flocked to Hong Kong as the opportunity for work arose. Wealthy Chinese and foreigners lived in palatial neo-classical style residences higher up, away from the congestion of the lower slopes where the labourers lived. The European Reservation Ordinance of 1888 created a European reservation in the Caine Road area. Chinese were allowed to live there so long as their homes were built according to European models. The rationale for this legislation was to give more “breathing space” to the Europeans. According to Governor des Voeux, the Chinese were used to living in crowded conditions, which could not be tolerated by the Europeans. This imposed standard accounts for the strongly European style building forms adopted by the wealthy Chinese, where the English interiors largely favoured a heavy Victorian drawing-room style, the Chinese interiors used traditional blackwood furnishings, marble furniture and ancestral portraits. An influx of Chinese furniture dealers, joiners, cabinet makers and curio shops sprang up along the present Queens Road East, presumably to capitalise on this new domestic market. British shopkeepers also served European tastes, with imported goods retailed “at enormous profits.”

had left. The result was that already one palace raises its head by the side of the next and many more are being built, everyone one (sic) of them threatening to eclipse the magnificence of the other and older neighbours. Rich shops, great hotels, splendid dining rooms, balconies turned towards the sea and pillars to support them from airy vestibules, short all the luxury and magnificence produced by architecture.

Chinese contracting firms emerged to cash in on the building boom. However, many were not used to building in a western style and underestimated the cost. When they could not finish the job the Government had to complete the works. One contractor who was to become one of the Chinese elite, Tam Achoy, was responsible for building and developing much of Hong Kong. see Anthony Walker and Stephen M. Rowlinson op., cit., p. 22-24

Welsh claims that the influx of Chinese into the territory was not confined to coolie class alone but also attracted Chinese merchants who already had experience working with foreigners. One such individual, Loo Aqui, invested heavily in Hong Kong property including brothels, gambling dens and Aqui’s Theatre, which staged the first amateur production in December 1845. As Welsh comments, compared to the newcomers, the indigenous people of the island were at a disadvantage when it came to reaping profits from the colony.


John Warner, Fragrant Harbour; Early Photographs of Hong Kong, London: John Warner Publications, 1976, see also G.B. Endacott op., cit., p. 243. Endacott refers to the European Reservation Ordinance of 1888 which created a European reservation in the Caine road area. Chinese were allowed to live there so long as their homes were built to certain standards - which may account for the strong neo-classical appearance.

E.J. Eitel, op. cit., p. 168

See: Osmand Tiffany jr. “An American in Hong Kong” in Barbara-Sue White (ed.), op. cit., p. 39
The difference between typical European and Chinese lifestyles can be seen clearly in the type of housing. Foreigners lived in spacious homes, while the majority of Chinese (the coolie class) lived in houses that were low and mean. Most of the Chinese lived in tenements (t'ang lou) built in the traditional Chinese (rural) style but with more floors added.

The normal village house is deep and narrow fronted, the width being fixed by the maximum usable length of the China fir pole with which most floors and roofs are constructed. The ground floor is one long room, with a minute courtyard at the back dividing the living room from the kitchen; frequently there is no courtyard. A narrow staircase leads up to the upper floor, which is a repetition of the ground floor; or to a cockloft (mezzanine floor) used for sleeping purposes. Windows are small and the interior usually dark. The ground floor is the living room, and also the workshop, and is often used for sleeping purposes as well. The factory is unknown in the country districts, and all the native industries are carried on in the home.

With the growth of Hong Kong, the opportunities for labour attracted a surge of Chinese males to the Territory there for the short-term to earn money to send home to their families. Hong Kong was known as a place for disreputable types, the absence of familial stability may also have contributed to lawlessness and gambling. The continued growth in this section of the population led to a pressing need for additional accommodation. Initially, the Chinese settled in areas known as the Lower and Upper Bazaars - constituting the first "Chinatown" in Hong Kong. The Middle Bazaar was removed by Governor Davis to prevent it encroaching on the European town, and resettled in an area known as Tai Ping Shan, which was reserved exclusively for Chinese. Building within the Chinese quarter was chaotic to say the least. Houses were constructed as closely together as possible, which gave inadequate provision for proper ventilation and sanitation.

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They are generally built with one story (sic): on the ground floor is the shop with its various goods and quaint perpendicular inscriptions and advertisements; on the first floor, which is thrown out over the footway and supported by wooded posts, so as to form a covered walk, the family live... Towards evening, when the paper lanterns are lighted and the shops are shut up, not by doors and shutters as with us, but by sort of cage and bamboo poles, through which the interior is visible, the Chinese house looks very fantastic and strange.

E. G. Pryor, Housing in Hong Kong, Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1983 (2nd edition) p. 5. In 1865 the population of Hong Kong was 125,500, 63% of whom were Chinese males, many of these were only here for short-term employment and would return to their families in China.

7 Ibid., p.4. The Summary Offences Ordinance of 1845 made it an offence for an owner or occupier not to maintain their property and to prevent it from becoming dangerous or ruined. The Building and Nuisances Ordinance of 1856 required dwellings to have an adequate place for a fire for the cooking of food and the provision of a privy and ashpit. There was no provision for adequate means of lighting ventilation, height of building, or width of streets, it did not however prohibit back-to-back building.
Landlords (both Chinese and foreign) exploited their hand with high rents and overcrowding.

Photographs taken of Tai Ping Shan in 1880 show rows of buildings, built in a vernacular style with charming arched windows and verandahs some of which still survive in parts of Hong Kong today. The sing-song houses (brothels) in this area were said to be colourful and bright\textsuperscript{22} "sporting brightly painted doors and windows with fancy curtains". But the pleasant arcades shutters and quaint tiled roofs belie the squalid conditions that existed within\textsuperscript{27}. One floor may have been so divided into tiny cubicles, there could be fifty or more people living inside. Each family might only have the basics for living, their furniture may have been nothing more than a few boards with reed mats for a bed, with wooden boxes underneath to store possessions.

Dr. Phineas Ayres, appointed Colonial surgeon in 1873, condemned the squalor of these homes. High rents demanded by the rich Europeans and Chinese landlords often meant that from three to eight families had to divide one room to share the high cost of rent; it was noted that sometimes one room was divided into four, each family with its own pig.\textsuperscript{24} Ayres had support from the Surveyor-general, J.M. Price, but so long as the population stayed relatively healthy, or at least so long as they were still free from epidemic the Government chose not to intervene.

Chinese landlords reacted violently against the recommendations advocated by the Surveyor-General and the interference of what they saw as the unwelcome imposition of western standards. The Governor, Pope-Hennessey, noted for his pro-Chinese stance, was swayed by the Chinese landlords who defended their rights to construct substandard buildings, because, they claimed, this form of living (crowded, unventilated, unsanitary conditions) was a "deep rooted cultural custom."\textsuperscript{25}

\textsuperscript{22} Wang Tao, "My Sojourn in Hong Kong" in Barbara-Sue White \textit{op., cit.}, p 63
Here the streets are neatly lined on both sides with gaudy houses sporting brightly painted doors and windows with fancy curtains.
\textsuperscript{24} To rural people the pig represented an investment of family capital, long before the days of banking for all. A pig was considered a safe place to keep one's money - a walking piggy bank, so to speak.
\textsuperscript{25} The Chinese character for family ideogrammatically is a pig under a tile, roof - symbolising that you can start a family when you have your pig (wealth) and your roof (home).
G.B. Endacott, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 185 In his report for 1875 Ayres reported that pigs were no longer kept in dwelling rooms. The 1866 Order and Cleanliness Ordinance of 1866 prohibited the keeping of pigs, or similar animals, in dwellings without a licence.
\textsuperscript{27} Governor Pope-Hennessey was swayed by his regard for Chinese customs. It was presented to him (by landlords) that this system worked well in China and should work in Hong Kong. Of
.. these habits, although condemned by the more recent rules of western science are, as a matter of fact, the outcome of a lengthened experience among the Chinese living in large and crowded cities, and are as deep rooted as most of their social customs, so it is quite certain that the tenants...as they would not understand the reason, would in no way avail themselves of the facilities for the free access of light and air. The windows looking out into the proposed alleys would be kept closed and the alleys themselves...would be made receptacles for the deposit of refuse...Chinese tenants are, as a rule...unable or unwilling to pay high rents...and it is only by so dividing the houses that many families...can reside in each division that Chinese property is made profitable and at the same time the necessary lowness of rent (is) attained....

It was known for tenants themselves to sub-let part of their lodging, cutting out the landlord, and making a profit on the rent of “surplus” floorspace. It was in the landlords’ interests to keep rents high, and obviously, where they could limit the cost of building their profits would be higher.

The Chadwick Report of 1882 shattered any support there might be for a Chinese-style sanitation for Chinese people especially since many of the worst conditions were referred to him by Chinese. The implementation of the Chadwick recommendations called for social reform and major public works. This was not without its problems. Landlords argued that by forcing improvements the Government would only push the price of the rents up, making the overcrowding situation worse. They proved to be a very strong voice and many of these recommendations were subsequently modified or amended. Dr. Ho Kai, a Chinese member of the Legislative Council, and fully qualified in western medicine and as a barrister, commented that the Chinese should be left alone since more space would mean more rent, and he claimed, their constitutions did not “require” these improvements.

course this did not take into consideration that overcrowded urban situation made traditional rural system impossible.

Cited in E. G. Pryor, op., cit., p 7 'Chinese Houses' the Hong Kong Government Gazette, 27 July 1878 pp 370-1. A petition submitted by landlords to Governor Pope Hennessey after the Surveyor general had rejected plans for what he considered to be unhealthy Chinese tenement housing. 1878

E. G. Pryor. op., cit., p. 13 The Chadwick report recommended: provision of open spaces at the rear of buildings, the prohibition of cocklofts and earthen floors, the provision of a window in every habitable room, and the limitation of overcrowding so that each adult would have 11.3 cubic metres of unobstructed space in undivided rooms and 17 cubic metres in rooms divided into cabins. Further recommendations included the reconstruction of the drainage system; the improvement of the water supply; the requisition and reconstruction by the Government of existing public latrines and the provision of additional facilities; the provision of public bath-houses and a laundry; the construction of new markets; and the improvement of the scavenging system. Those buildings that could not be improved should be purchased by the Government rebuilt and re-sold.

W.K. Chan op., cit., p. 141 Chan points out that in opposing this bill Dr. Ho Kai, as a financier himself, was protecting the interests of the landlords, not the Chinese public.
It was only a matter of time, of course, until all the warnings of the potential for an epidemic would come true. In 1894 2,552 people died when bubonic plague broke out. Governor Robinson had to act forcefully and quickly to avoid the spread of the epidemic. The Chinese living in the tenements, however, were suspicious and afraid of western medicine and methods of containment. The Sanitary Board who were given the power to recommend whatever action it would take to control the epidemic declared 350 houses unfit for human inhabitation and forcibly removed 7,000 Chinese from their homes. This action could have been perceived as being racially directed the plague only affected the low-income Chinese. For the Chinese who had little contact with foreigners, and little understanding or knowledge of western ideas on sanitation, this response from the Authorities was a rude awakening to foreign intervention to a Chinese way of life. Governor Robinson was unsympathetic to the Chinese culture of crowding:

Educated to unsanitary habits, and accustomed from infancy to herd together, they were unable to grasp the necessity of segregation; they were quite content to die like sheep spreading disease around them as long as they were left undisturbed...

Despite measures of enforced sanitation, with the recurrence of plague every year, it was clear that something more had to be done. In 1902 Chadwick was asked to update his report. Although, he found some improvements to the drainage system had been made, crowded conditions were worse than twenty years previously. He recommended that these properties should be rebuilt and minimum space allocation standards introduced. Again, it was found to be difficult to enforce these recommendations as regulations. The land scarcity kept property values high and made it unrealistic to prohibit cubicles, these were often the only affordable accommodation available to the very poor. Secondly, three

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G. B. Endacott op., cit., p. 216

It was rumoured that Western methods involved plucking out the eyes of newborn babies, these rumours sent thousands fleeing to the mainland. The actual method of containment involved the use of troops to forcibly disinfect the infected areas - which Chinese people disliked since they saw it as an invasion of their privacy. The Tung Wah hospital wanted to take control over the treatment of Chinese victims but Robinson was adamantine this was a civil matter requiring drastic, but immediate methods.

Ibid., op., cit., p. 188, The Sanitary Board which was set up in response to the Chadwick Report was the early forerunner to the current Urban Services Department.

Frank Welsh, op., cit., p. 303 Sir William Robinson, Hong Kong Report - 1894

G. B. Endacott op., cit., p. 278. The plague recurred yearly until 1924

E. G. Pryor, op., cit., p. 18 Public Health and Buildings Ordinance 1903. Minimum standards were set at 4.65 m sq. of habitable floor area and 15.56 cubic metres of unobstructed internal air space per adult - 3.25 sq. metre and 9.34 cubic metre per person. Windows had to be provided in every inhabitable room. No more than two cubicles per room with a minimum of floor area of 5.95 sq. metre. Building height was limited to a dimension not greater than the width of the street. For land leased before 1903 maximum height was set at one and a half times street width to a maximum of 23.2 m and maximum of four storeys.
quarters of the population lived in homes that were congested or sub standard with many more living rough on the streets, the Government itself refused to do anything constructive to relieve the situation. They wished to keep the population free from epidemics yet they could not respond effectively to the housing problem.

The Owen Report

For the average Chinese living in urban Hong Kong there were few alternatives to a crowded home. The wealthy Chinese and Europeans, who were a minority, were unaffected by domestic density. In the Report of the Housing Commission 1935, Owen recognised that the problem of imposing building improvements would only add to the rent of people who were already economically stretched; it seemed an insoluble position. He remarked on the tolerance of the Chinese towards these housing conditions which, he suggested, stemmed from their fatalistic attitude:

Overbuilding, overcrowding and lack of sanitation have been taken for granted as the population have always been used to such conditions, and their fatalistic attitude towards life has produced no strong demand for improvement. 37

The majority of Chinese lived in very crowded homes, people saw that they were no worse off than anyone else, they were not demanding, nor did they expect a better standard of living. The argument here again suggests the Chinese long-suffering tolerance was preventing them from improving this situation. Their fatalistic attitude made them easy to rule, they were prepared to be self-reliant but, as Owen added, it was "unfortunately inimical to progress". He predicted the longer this situation was sustained, the more it would cost to put right - a strong hint that Government intervention would be inevitable. 38 The Chinese were fatalistic about the wide gap in standards between western and Chinese largely because they had little contact with foreigners and the idea of western living standards was so far removed from most Chinese people's experience they would hardly have considered this standard might ever apply to them.

35Ibid., p. 19 the Hong Kong population reached 457,000 by 1911 of whom 314,000 lived in congested urban areas.
36W.K. Chan, op.cit., p. 153
38Ibid., p. 11

Sooner or later the claim for better housing conditions for the masses is sure to be pressed. The longer the action is delayed the more costly it will become.
By English standards the normal tenement floor would only permit of four adult persons living in it; i.e., less than one average family. By Hong Kong standards two normal families can occupy one floor without overcrowding. Poverty frequently compels more than two families to share a floor.9

For new immigrants, a fatalistic attitude was a distinct advantage, since the Hong Kong Government largely expected them to be self-reliant. The laissez-faire Government was concerned only with maintaining basic safety and health measures and did very little to alleviate the housing problem which fell squarely on the private sector. They were able to avoid taking action so long as health in the Colony remained generally good and, it could be argued, that if the Chinese who lived there did not complain then it must not be such a great problem. At least under colonial rule in Hong Kong, the Chinese had some degree of stability compared to the political upheavals in China. There was also plenty of work, which gave people the chance to make a living and improve their situation. Owen pointed out, many of the people living in congested areas could afford to move to a bigger space, their decision to remain in crowded homes, he attributed, somewhat unflatteringly, to a "herd instinct". But, he also pointed out, there was a cultural tendency which encouraged extended families to live together under one roof; something that was not recognised in previous building ordinances. He criticised previous ordinances which ignored family life "amongst a people whose regards for family ties is probably stricter than that of any other nation in the world"10. As new immigrants it may also have come down to a question of priorities; whether to spend money on a bigger, more comfortable home space, or to save money for long-term investment, such as, children’s education or a business. As sojourners people may have been prepared to put up with some discomfort with a view to saving money. Whatever the reason, in the eyes of an outsider, the congested conditions were an unhealthy, slum environment, which reflected badly on the residents.

That some tuition in the art of living is necessary must be conceded. They must be taught the value of personal and household cleanliness, the proper use of sanitary appliances, respect for property and the ill effects of overcrowding.4

Given the extremes of crowding and the lack of facilities it would have been difficult for anyone in this situation to maintain a good standard of sanitation. There were several aspects to the problem. First, the Chinese population was steadily growing and needed accommodation. Secondly, the type of accommodation that people could afford, and where they were allowed to live, was in short supply. Thirdly, the property developers

9 Ibid., p. 17
10 Ibid., p. 17
4 Ibid. p. 16
were in a strong position. The demand for housing was so great they could charge as much rent as they liked without having to add to, or upgrade, their existing supply.

Post-Pacific War

The period after the Pacific war is normally pin-pointed as the beginning of modern day Hong Kong. Hong Kong was forced to cope with unprecedented influxes of refugees from China which were to form the new population of Hong Kong. Crisis levels in housing meant that virtually the whole population was reduced to living in very low quality, and desperately overcrowded accommodation. For the current older generation living in Hong Kong, this was their first, and formative, experience of Hong Kong domestic space.

With the occupation of the Hong Kong by the Japanese, the unofficial population of Hong Kong in 1941 dropped dramatically from 1,600,000 to less than three quarters of a million at the Japanese surrender, as people fled (or were forcibly deported) over the border to China. By 1946 the population was back up to its pre-war figure mostly as a result of people returning to the urban areas, but because of war damage, accommodation, poor as it was before the war, was in even more short supply.4

In The Annual Report on Hong Kong 1946, post-Pacific war domestic space in Hong Kong was still categorised as being either European type dwelling or Chinese. Home for the typical Chinese was invariably a room or cubicle in a shared tenement.

Each floor is sub-divided into rooms or cubicles of not less than 60 square feet and may accommodate three or four families. A communal kitchen is provided, but in the old type of building no provision is made for latrine or ablation accommodation: public latrines and bathrooms have been erected to meet this shortcoming.5

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4 Estimated at 400,000 see Annual Report on Hong Kong for the year 1956, Hong Kong: Local Printing Press.
5 Annual Report on Hong Kong for the Year 1946. Hong Kong: Local Printing Press, p.56 Tenement type housing for 160,000 persons and European type housing for 7,000 persons suffered destruction or serious damage during the years 1941-45. Destruction to the Chinese homes was caused mainly by allied aerial bombardment, while damage to the European homes was caused mainly by looting. Re-building a European house would cost twice as much to repair as it cost to build ten years earlier.

* The New Territories was largely unaffected by the population influx as people preferred to live in the urban areas, close to their work. Village houses were normally handed down from father to son rather than rented out. The homes themselves were simple spaces open to the rafters with a cockloft above the main room. see Philip Hart Clark op., cit., and Ibid., p. 55
6 Annual Report on Hong Kong for the Year 1946, Hong Kong: Local Printing Press, 1947, p.54

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The Report admits the existing housing, and past building ordinances, did not conform with modern practice (or design standards) so that the Authorities had to resort to drastic contingency measures to prevent further outbreaks of plague in these congested areas. 

At the other end of the scale were the European-type houses. These were also favoured by growing numbers of wealthy Chinese seeking a more comfortable lifestyle.

...the European resident lives in a suburban-type villa, flat or small house not unlike the equivalent in the United Kingdom.....The Kowloon European-type suburbs developed extensively during the period 1930-40, the houses built not unlike those in the average London suburb with the addition of servants’ quarters and, in most cases, of the verandahs which the semi-tropical climate requires.

After the war the Government was engaged in short-term relief aid. Much of the population they regarded as economic refugees to a Colony that was already hard pressed for accommodation and resources.

But a still more important factor is that the overwhelming majority of the Colony’s residents, of whatever nationality, does not regard Hong Kong as its home; most of them come here solely to seek a living, more money, recreation or political asylum and strike no roots.

With the 1949 victory of Communism in China, which resulted in droves of people arriving in Hong Kong, this time as political refugees, the situation was exacerbated. Once again Hong Kong had to do what it could to provide humanitarian aid but with so many people, there was simply no place for them to live. They were, however, self-reliant, young and able-bodied. They were not waiting around to live off handouts. They were resourceful and determined to fend for themselves. With little option, and a desperate need, they built themselves homes on the hillsides in shacks made of whatever materials could be found. They built on steep slopes, and roof tops. Wherever there was a space squatter homes soon sprung up. By the end of 1949 the population stood at two million, an estimated 300,000 of these were squatters. (Plate 4)

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*Ibid. It was reported that the Health Inspector cleansed the urban district with kerosene emulsion solution three times between May and December.

*Ibid., p. 55

* Ibid., p. 55

*Ibid., With the re-instatement of the Hong Kong dollar and the abolition of the yen, ninety per cent of the population were left with no money. The relief programme cost the Government HK $5,000,000 during 1946

*Ibid., 1948, p. 88
The Government tried to contain the situation as best they could by keeping these structures to fringe areas, to avoid fire and health risks but minor fires were frequent. In 1950 a major fire broke out in Kowloon City which left 20,000 homeless. Clearly this was a problem that was not going to go away. Squatter settlements constructed of found materials were a serious fire and health hazard to the Territory; short term measures proved to be a costly business and hardly scratched the surface of the real squatter housing problem.

**Government Housing**

The Shek Kip Mei fire has been widely written about as the turning point prompting Government intervention and the start of a housing programme that would eventually become the biggest in the free world. As Hopkins points out Hong Kong was only able to solve its housing problem through the provision of cheap Government housing and tolerance of low housing design standards. It could be argued that the Hong Kong housing programme was a success only because the Hong Kong population at that time did not demand, and did not expect a standard of housing on par with developed countries.

In Shek Kip Mei on Christmas night 1953 53,000 squatters lost their homes after a major squatter fire in an area, which was once a farming community, but had grown into large squatter villages with a mix of residential, industrial and cottage factory use where 60,000 lived or worked. This was not a shanty slum but a thriving settlement and community. Photographs of this time show a densely packed mix of stone and wooden structures fully serviced by shops and hawker stands.

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50 Annual Departmental Report, Commissioner for Resettlement 1955-6 In order to free up land for construction the Government established resettlement areas for squatters where they could build their own huts or cottages to certain standards in approved areas. Tolerated areas such as Chai Wan and Ngau Tau Kok were for poorer squatters who could only rebuild their existing huts. However, the majority of squatters were unwilling to move to tolerated areas or could not afford to pay the cost to build these huts themselves, when the Government intervened to build these for them at cost, the majority still could not afford to pay. The Hong Kong Settlers Housing Corporation financed partly by the Government and the public in 1952 built 1,000 cottages which became the property of the settlers after rental of seven years.

51 Keith Hopkins, "Public and Private Housing in Hong Kong" in D.J. Dwyer (ed.) The City As A Centre of Change in Asia, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1972

52 HKHA Rising High in Harmony, Hong Kong: HKHA, 1993, The fire swept through four settlements - Shek Kip Mei village, Pak Tin village, Wor Tsai village and Tai Po Road village - an area of 45 acres.
Housing conditions were far from ideal but people had little alternative, except the prospect of paying high rent to live in a crowded tenement block - if they could afford it.

After the fire, the Government promptly set up temporary relief aid. As a measure of their own self-reliance, just under half the fire victims quickly managed to find some sort of accommodation for themselves elsewhere, which left 27,000 with nowhere to go and forced them to live in make-shift shacks on the nearby streets. A further fire in Tai Hung Tung July 1954 left 24,000 homeless. It was clear that the squatter problem had to be dealt with decisively.\textsuperscript{35}

Why did the Government leave it so late to respond to the refugee problem? Up until 1953 the Government assumed that those who found it difficult to earn a living would return to China when conditions there "returned to normal".\textsuperscript{34} Secondly, they were delaying in the hope that some other country would intervene to assist with the refugee problem - which was not, as it turned out forthcoming. Thirdly, the Government admitted they were daunted by the immensity of the problem and in particular by the prospect of accommodating so many people in permanent homes, when it had always been their policy not to get involved with the provision of housing. If they did intervene as landlords, it would amount to acceptance of these people as new citizens, with all the pressure on social welfare that this would entail such as schooling and medical care. Finally, on top of this there was the pressing need to re-house people living in the tenements, which were five to six times more crowded than they were before the war.

There was of course an underlying political agenda. Before the establishment of Communism in China relations between the two States had been relatively tolerant. However, with so many people displaced from their native land, with nowhere for them to live and no land for them to farm\textsuperscript{36}, there was the fear that this would lead to social instability in Hong Kong. The Hong Kong Government wanted to keep out of China's problems but with a population that was over 95% Chinese there was always the fear that revolution might spill over to Hong Kong. Communism had taken such a hold in China, it

\textsuperscript{35} Annual Reports for Hong Kong 1955 & 1957 The Urban Council appointed an emergency sub-committee which led to the setting up of the Resettlement Department in April 1954. It was clear that the temporary two-storey cement and brick structure "Bowring bungalows" (named after the Director of Public works) which housed 35,000 to 40,000 fire victims did not make good use of the available land to house all the needy squatters. The recommendation was made to build six or seven storey buildings so that 35% more people could be resettled in the Tai Hung Tung area than before the fire. see Annual Report Commissioner for Resettlement 1955-6.

\textsuperscript{34} Annual Report Commissioner for Resettlement 1955-6. p. 2

\textsuperscript{36} Most sources indicate that these people were illiterate farmers but recent sources now dispute this.

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would be unlikely that Hong Kong, as a British Colony, would be able to survive if the people could be swayed by the rhetoric of the new regime, of a new China.\textsuperscript{56}

With the State intervention it made good economic sense to erect permanent structures which could house 2,000 people, for the same amount it cost every fortnight in relief for the fire victims. In response to the Shek Kip Mei fire, the Government implemented the Mark I blocks, so-called "H" blocks, which were designed and built as emergency housing by the Public Works Department\textsuperscript{7}. This move represented a new role for the Government as "financier, contractor and landlord".

It was decided, in view of the emergency situation, that the space allowance in each of the 120 sq. ft (9' 6" x 12' 6") H blocks rooms would be set at 24 sq. feet per adult, with children under ten counting for half. The Government were able to justify a shift in what might be considered to be "normal standards" - or western design standards - on the grounds that it was, at least more acceptable than what was "normal" for Hong Kong at that time.

The allowance of 24 square feet to an adult represented a considerable degree of overcrowding by normal standards, but this was emergency accommodation; it was sanitary, weather-proof and fire-proof, and it was more realistic to judge it by what it replaced rather than by arbitrary standards of what was desirable.\textsuperscript{58}

It is significant they should relate what is "desirable" in terms of space to an "arbitrary" standard. Here, five adults shared a 120 sq. feet "Room" that was little more than a cubicle with one door and shutter window (no glass). Bathing and toilet facilities were communal and located in the section adjoining the wings of the "H". There were no lifts and initially no electricity.\textsuperscript{59} The rooms were back to back and linked by a balcony that ran around the perimeter where residents cooked immediately in front of their doors.

\textsuperscript{56} Hong Kong Annual Report, 1957 chapter 1 "A Problem of People", p. 9
This met with some success, and, even where the Marxist doctrines had no appeal and the initial pogroms were roundly condemned, there were many overseas Chinese who saw in the solidarity, determination and incorruptibility of the new régime, spiritual qualities from which a new and better China might eventually emerge when the first excesses had run their course, and when the exotic doctrines had been tempered by the Chinese genius for compromise.

\textsuperscript{57} Annual Report, Commissioner for Resettlement 1967-8 - The design was "simple and austere" to keep rents to a minimum and speed construction.

\textsuperscript{58} Hong Kong Annual Report 1957, p. 25
Commissioner for Resettlement p. 12 5 adults sharing could mean two families or five bachelors.

\textsuperscript{59} It was originally thought that low-income people could not afford electricity so it was not provided. Once residents rigged up illegal supplies of electricity the authorities had to respond by installing a proper system - 2 Amp supply - with the installation cost later added to the rent.
With each block housing over two thousand people clearly there had to be set rules to maintain an overall standard of sanitation. New tenants were instructed in the rules when they first moved in. It was bound to take some time before the residents and authorities (who were also new to this type of management) could adjust to this type of dwelling and lifestyle - the rules were not always adhered to and often the public space was spoiled. The H-blocks instigated a new form of dwelling in Hong Kong, which set the base standard for subsequent Government blocks. The number of storeys might be considered relatively low-rise by today's standards but the overall density was very high, with limited public and recreational areas for residents' use.

There are various opinions as to the real reason that the Government suddenly changed from a laissez-faire policy to a concerted effort to set up a comprehensive housing organisation. Hopkins maintains the Government's "conscience was singed" there was a need to clear land for development, to reduce the risk of squatter fires and to remove the third-world appearance of squatter villages in the Territory. Lai and Yu argue that the public housing provision was part of the territory's industrialisation programme. In retrospect it is easy to see how much the programme contributed and sustained the growth of the State transforming a population problem into a massive labour force. Castells also confirms that welfare was secondary to property development and sanitation.

The Government set about a comprehensive programme of squatter clearance and resettlement into the new estates. It was with the understanding that the squatter was in most cases not a squatter by choice, rather that the Government had lost control of its land with so many illegal structures and unlicensed trades occupying Crown land. And, for as

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60 *Annual Report Commissioner for Resettlement* 1955-6, p. 15
For the Estate staff intake days, and the following two or three weeks, are the most important of all; for it is during this initial period that the new settler must be weaned away from many of the deeply ingrained habits and concepts that pervade squatter areas. He is taught to make the best of the simple accommodation provided and to forget his defeatist attitude towards dirt and disease.

Lai reports that although people were required to place their rubbish in a bin outside their door, which would be emptied every day, they found it more convenient to empty the rubbish over the balcony into the street. As a result the courtyard and hawkers canopies were littered with rubbish.


63 Si-Ming Iai & Fu-Lai Yu, "Hong Kong's Public Housing Programme" *Urban Studies*, vol.27, no. 1, 1990, pp. 105-118

long as the Government had delayed taking decisive action, land that was occupied illegally was officially holding up the development of the Territory.\textsuperscript{65}

The Government fully recognised that housing was in short supply across all sections of the community. The majority of people lived in crowded sub-standard conditions in rooms, cubicles, bedspaces and cocklofts, sharing primitive unsanitary facilities. Many were even less fortunate and were forced to live on rooftops and street alleys. Methods of utilising every available space were common throughout the Territory and the lack of good sanitary conditions was part of everyday Hong Kong life. However, a situation that was at best tolerated, or at worst ignored, in the nineteenth century could not be allowed to continue in the latter half of the twentieth century.

The Hong Kong Housing Society was founded in 1948, as a subsidised voluntary body, to build and manage low-cost housing flats for low-income families but it was apparent that a more comprehensive programme was required. The Hong Kong Housing Authority was established in 1954 to build homes “to a good basic standard, which will be a permanent asset to the community”. These were aimed principally at white-collar workers and built to a higher standard than the resettlement blocks at a space allocation of 35 sq. feet per person and included a self-contained kitchen, toilet and working verandah. In 1956 new building regulations were brought in which permitted a higher intensity of land use.\textsuperscript{66} Government Low-Cost housing (GLCH) was introduced in 1961 under the auspices of the Housing Authority to provide multi-storey homes for people living in overcrowded and unsatisfactory conditions who earned less than those eligible for HKHA homes\textsuperscript{67} but who nonetheless required re-housing. These were built to a lower standard than HKHA blocks but higher than the Resettlement blocks. By the early 1960’s the Territory had three different types of Government housing projects, designed to meet the residential and income needs of the community.

\textsuperscript{65} Annual Report, Commissioner for Resettlement 1955-6, p.5

Squatter clearance and resettlement operations are not therefore undertaken primarily for the benefit of the squatter. They are simply the only practical means of removing, in the interests of the whole community, the fire risk, the health hazard, the threat to law and order, and the obstruction to the Colony’s future development, which is presented by the squatter areas.

\textsuperscript{66} E.G. Pryor, op., cit., p. 26

\textsuperscript{67} Philip Hart Clark, op., cit.,

The 1961 census which analysed a total of 687,200 households can be summarised as follows: 138,000 living in boats; 12,000 living on the streets; 50,000 living in shops, often sleeping under the counter, 260,000 with only a bed space (often in tiers, or under the bed, or sleeping in shifts with other tenants occupying the same bed); 1,400,000 living in cubicles, 45% of the entire population in 1961.
With the continued influx of refugees, overcrowding continued to be a problem as relatives from the Chinese mainland made their way to Hong Kong to be re-united with their families. The Authorities were aware of the increased crowding in these homes but turned a blind eye to this as an infringement of registration. Wherever possible, through direct decantation, they arranged for families to move to a bigger space.

As the Housing programmes continued to grow improvements were made on earlier block designs. Later models, such as the Mark blocks III and IV provided bigger rooms in various sizes which could accommodate different sized families. The Mark IV was built at sixteen storeys high with a lift serving the higher floors. Private balconies and a lavatory were also introduced to raise the living standards of residents and a standard room size was 129 square feet to house 4-5 people. This was hardly spacious, and was still technically a “room” but as a self-contained unit it gave the family more privacy in their own home.

Against the odds, Hong Kong was beginning to show that it could cope with the problem of housing its people. But, in May 1962 China relaxed its border controls resulting in yet another flood of immigrants into the Territory. This was a reminder that Hong Kong’s growth could be undermined at any time through the sheer numbers of people over the border. China’s power over Hong Kong was a constant threat to the stability of the Territory. Sympathies with communism came to the fore during the riots in April 1967, which brought instability and division throughout the territory sparked by a dispute about working conditions. In the press the Governor, Sir David Trench, was criticised for the way he administered Hong Kong. It was argued that the Government had not given Hong Kong people a sense of belonging nor had it attempted to involve the people in the decisions affecting the Territory as a whole.

Community Building

The Government recognised they had to do something constructive to bring the community together. Although the new Hong Kong society was largely made up of people who were not born here they were now producing first generation Hong Kong

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Footnotes:

6 Annual Report Commissioner for Resettlement, 1964-5 In the older estates families were found to be living with less than 24 sq. feet per adult. In the year 1964-5 16,708 people were moved because of overcrowding compared to 5,713 the previous year.

69 For a full account see: John Cooper, Colony in Conflict: The Hong Kong Disturbances may 1967-January 1968, Hong Kong: Swindon Book Company, 1970

70 Ibid. p. 297
citizens. Hong Kong's strength was to be its people and a planned comprehensive programme of building for the community would make its citizens more aware of what their Government had done for them through housing, industry and social services. Housing was one of the most positive aspects of Government support for the people of Hong Kong and in October, 1967 there was a celebration to mark the millionth settler - a six year old disabled girl, Jenny Fung.\(^7\)

Housing problems, however, persisted. (Plate 5) By the early 1970's the old space allocation standards clearly needed to be revised. In 1972 Governor Mac Lehose introduced a Ten Year Housing Programme aimed to provide public housing for about 1.5 million people and to upgrade the living conditions of future and existing accommodation.\(^7\) A new Hong Kong Housing Authority was established in April 1973 to manage, and to continue to develop, all public housing estates including Resettlement estates and Low-cost housing\(^7\) and to plan, build and manage Home Ownership flats to be sold to families within certain incomes on terms approved by the Government.

In 1976 the HOS (Home Ownership Scheme) was set up for the lower middle class whose income was higher than the set limit for Public Housing, but inadequate to facilitate private home purchase\(^7\). This new scheme heralded a departure from basic housing towards an affordable residential standard on par with flats built in the private sector. These flat sizes ranged between 400 and 650 square feet of usable floor area. In order to market this new scheme to the public a visitor centre was opened in Oi Man estate, which showed models and photographs of the typical units. Nearly 200,000 people visited this

\(^{71}\) The Government paid for all the decoration of the Fung family flat and used the opportunity to photograph the family leaving their boat in Aberdeen, buying furniture and moving in to their new home in Shek Pai Wan estate.

\(^7\) E.G. Pryor, op. cit., p. 68

Under the forceful direction of the newly appointed Governor, Sir Murray Mac Lehose, the Government formulated in October 1972 a ten-year housing programme with the aims of eliminating all squatter areas; facilitating the redevelopment of cottage areas; providing self-contained dwellings for households sharing accommodation in the private sector; relieving overcrowding in existing public housing estates; modernizing the early resettlement estates; and providing new housing for those people who have to be re-housed as a consequence of the Government's schemes and policies.

\(^7\) The old Housing Authority blocks and Low Cost Housing blocks were officially referred to as group "A" estates while the Resettlement estates are known as group "B" estates.

\(^7\) The Government's policy was to sell these flats on a non-profit basis. Purchasers were required to make a down payment of 10% of the purchase price, which ranged from $93,000 to $166,000. Special mortgage arrangements were made with banks with fixed interest rates over a maximum period of 15 years. Since this scheme was designed to bring in new buyers to an inflated housing market there was a stipulation to prevent speculation that purchasers were not allowed to re-sell the flat until at least five years after ownership.
centre indicating considerable interest from the public in this new scheme. The new Private Sector Participation Scheme (PSPS) set in place in 1976 shifted the emphasis on private ownership to encourage an aspiring middle class. After a slow start, there soon proved a major demand for subsidised home ownership. However, the viability of these projects was threatened by escalating building costs and land values.

In 1976 the Housing Authority finally abandoned the space standard of 35 sq. feet per person and replaced it with a flexible scale permitting up to 90 square feet total lettable area per person. Standard flat sizes would in future be built up to a maximum of 550 sq. feet so tenants could have a wider choice if they were willing to pay for the space.

New Towns of Sha Tin, Tuen Mun and Tsuen Wan-Kwai Chung public estates in the New Territories continued to be planned with a lower overall population level per acre than urban areas. The estates were planned as neighbourhoods complete with kindergartens, shops, wet market, sports facilities, playgrounds, clinics and social welfare units, and their own bus services and shopping centres.

It was estimated in 1980 that 20% of the population 1.2 million households were living in unsatisfactory conditions. 750,000 people were living in squatter huts, which clearly fell well below universally accepted housing standards yet consistently proved to be a viable housing stock. Despite the tremendous efforts by the Hong Kong Housing Authority, illegal immigrants still kept coming through on a touch-base policy; it was decided that these new arrivals of illegal immigrants would not be given priority above long term residents.

The Long Term Housing Strategy introduced officially in 1987 looked ahead to the millennium. The HKHA recognised long standing demands from tenants and accepted

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75 Applications were restricted to households earning up to $3,500 a month and to public housing tenants who were willing to give up their subsidised flat. 35,822 applications were received for the first phase of 8,300 flats. Although only 8,008 of these were from Public Housing tenants it was decided that 50% of overall applicants for the scheme should be drawn from this sector to free up housing for the needy.
76 E. G. Pryor op. cit., p. 70. In order to keep up with costs the HOS flat prices had to be increased which put them beyond the reach of most of the people at which the scheme was aimed. The Government was forced to exclude the value of the land in order to keep house prices down.
77 Hong Kong Housing Authority Report 1976-77, p. 7
78 see Hong Kong Housing Authority Report, 1980-81 p. 8 An estimated 300,000 people entered the Territory in the preceding two years but from October 1980 illegal immigrants would no longer be granted residential status.
79 see Castells et al op. cit., pp. 37-41 for detailed description and analysis.
80 Ibid., p. 38 the demands were : 1) to accept eligibility of small households (1-2 persons) as permanent tenants (2) to include squatters from outside development zones in the re-housing
that there should be more consultation with tenants' organisations. Home ownership was
given greater priority and better off tenants were expected to pay double to shift them to
the private market or subsidised home ownership. As standards were changed it brought
about moves to redevelop housing standards of the later Mark V and VI blocks, which
were by now, viewed as poor housing. The existing squatter sites were accepted as long
term accommodation with improvements made to on-site facilities. The Government also
introduced the controversial Sale of Flats to Sitting Tenants Scheme. Which, as Castells
comments marked a significant change for the public housing tenant from being “a
homeless immigrant to a homeowning citizen.”

The Long Term Housing Strategy responded to the consumer's needs, and demands to
provide better quality housing. It was important to see how the Government envisaged
future design and living standards. First, there was to be a greater variety in flat sizes,
which marked a revision of the way in which design could respond to the household’s
requirements. The move from the one room space towards a dedicated flat space came
about with the rise in space allocation standards, which facilitated greater scope for
design. Secondly, there was to be greater interchangeability between HOS and rental
design, which would further open up the availability of better quality housing to low-income families. Those families who could not afford private housing could at least,
expect a higher standard of rented accommodation.

With the launch in 1990 of the Harmony block, this new flexible design was capable of
providing from 1-3 bedrooms with a projected site planning criteria of 3.8 persons/flat
occupancy giving a gross population density of 2,600 persons/ha. Rents for new flats are
set so as not to exceed a median rent-to-income ratio of 15 per cent for the minimum
internal floor area allocation standard of 5.5 square metres and 18.5 per cent for seven
square metres per person.

Despite this provision of Government housing, Hong Kong has never been, and is not, a
welfare state. Traditionally the elderly would have been looked after by their children and
would have continued to work for as long as they could. Unfortunately many of the
elderly, without dependants and living off a very low income could not afford private
housing and were not, as singletons, eligible for public housing. The HKHA have
designed special units for the elderly and the disabled, there is also provision for day

programmes (3) to authorise the spouse of one married child to stay as an additional tenant in the
parents' flat

(3) "Responses to a Change in Aspirations", Building Journal Hong Kong China, September 1988, pp.
88-91
centres nearby and social services for the needy.\textsuperscript{62} In the later HKHA Reports there is a greater emphasis on community care, privatisation, building maintenance and building design.

As Castells pointed out, the change in housing policy in the 1970's created a demand of community and social organisation centred around local demands which brought about a greater say for tenants in the housing policy. Home ownership became a reality for those who would not be able to afford the private sector and the Government provided more space than ever before which gave tenants more scope for interior design. In the past the Government only set out to shelter its people, today it is constructing homes that they hope will meet their residential needs.

\textbf{Professional Discourse}

The main design consideration is people. Design covers the space inside as well as outside the buildings. It requires a true understanding of how people live and behave. It warrants research into what matters (sic) people most, be it comfort, safety or security.\textsuperscript{63}

The recent exhibition, \textit{Housing the Millions}, staged by the HKHA, featuring transformations in public housing design over the past forty years. Each design modification reproduced in thousands of homes in different blocks and estates all over Hong Kong affects thousands of people, shaping their homes, and lifestyle. While the design discourse of HKHA architecture and planning is subject to criticism the space discussed least within the design profession is the interior space.

There was never any illusion about the low quality of the Mark I design, which, it was claimed was designed on functionalist grounds to accommodate thousands of people quickly at a low cost, at a time when manpower in construction and the professional sectors was scarce\textsuperscript{50}. Designed well below UN standards, and below previous recommended Hong Kong space standards\textsuperscript{8} the Mark I blocks were, however, built as permanent housing, and designed to facilitate conversion into self-contained units in anticipation of the rise in the standard of living.\textsuperscript{46} In 1973 when the new Housing

\begin{thebibliography}{10}
\item The ground floor of housing blocks which was once left void, is now more commonly used for social services and special needs units.
\item article by Jose Lei (ex-Chief Architect, Public Works Department) "Public Housing in the 1970's An Appraisal" Building Journal Hong Kong China, March 1989, pp. 24-25
\item see Public Health and Buildings Ordinance 1903
\item Hong Kong Annual Report 1957 p.26
\end{thebibliography}
Authority took over complete responsibility for designing, building and managing these estates there were only eight architects. By 1988 there were already five hundred in the architectural division alone. At densities of 2,700 persons per ha. high rise building is the only viable alternative. Currently the HA build up to 39 storeys high with less site coverage than before thus freeing space for landscaping. Building ordinances now place minimum requirements for open space and car ownership, and car park spaces also affects the space at ground level. Flat sizes, however, are built generally smaller than the private sector. The fast pace in building has, in the past, led to poor quality control in construction but, since 1993 maintenance of the old housing stock has been monitored under the CARE programme and building contractors now have to meet international standards.

In general residents complained more about the rent increase, estate location and tenancy restrictions than about the design of the flats. The design of the flat layout previously was based on "predetermined criteria" set by architects according to what they felt was required, rather than on post-occupancy data. Today there is more design consultation with tenants before flats come on stream. Flat sizes were developed from statistics that were based proportionally on how much tenants could afford. The Twin Tower was an economical structure to build, it provided good ventilation to the flats was originally considered, by the architects, to be a successful design. However, after tenant feedback it was observed the inside of the core could be claustrophobic, ventilation was a problem and tenants desired more privacy.

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87 "Public Housing - a Programme Transcending Time and Lifestyle", interview with Assistant Director Housing Architect, Stephen Poon Sing-Chi, Building Journal Hong Kong China, August 1988, pp. 44-49
88 See: Raymond Bates, " Hong Kong Housing Authority The Evolution of Maintenance Management" in Housing For Millions, The Challenge Ahead, conference 20-23 May 1996, Hong Kong, p. 75 In 1980 with the collapse of part of a floor slab in Kwai Fong Estate, which was only seven years old, the Housing Department discovered that concrete in certain estates had been mixed with salt water. This led to a massive re-examination of all HKHA property. In 1986 it was decided that 26 blocks had to be demolished, 374 required repairs and 86 needed strengthening. CARE - Conditions, Appraisal, Repair, Evaluate see Fung Tung, “ The Housing Challenge Ahead: Hong Kong” paper delivered at the Housing For Millions, The Challenge Ahead, op. cit., pp. 122-127
90 Before now, in the days of the Oi Man estate, we built housing blocks based on a predetermined set of design criteria. In other words, we dictated the type of units that we supplied and the people on the waiting list had to adjust to suit themselves to the accommodations. At that time, we did not have precise information about what the people on the waiting list wanted. The only yardstick we had was the Hong Kong Outline Planning Standards.
It was not until the later Trident blocks were introduced that the old one room multifunctional space was finally replaced by a bigger and better planned interior. This gave tenants the option to partition the space to suit their needs. With the steady rise in the standard of living, residents began to acquire more appliances, which put a strain on the meagre electricity supply. By the 1980's it was observed even low-income families had refrigerators and air conditioners, among other electrical appliances, which needed to be taken into consideration within new designs. The bathroom, for example, in the pre-Trident blocks was normally a small multi-purpose cubicle, un-tiled, the showerhead located beside the toilet, with barely enough space to move around. In later blocks the bathrooms have been given more attention. The introduction of bathtubs to all of the new blocks marks a departure from a purely utilitarian approach to domestic needs and a shift towards a more comfortable domestic lifestyle.

Like the people it serves the Housing Authority itself is a very demanding client. The objectives it sets for its professionals are very simple, so they say. All it requires is completion on time, within budgets, and in top quality.

In the past decade the HKHA designs have progressed even further with their new flagship Concord and Harmony blocks (designed to 7 sq. metres per person). Here, the design emphasis is on flexibility, and ease of construction, which gives tenants more scope to subdivide the space according to their needs and greater opportunity to personalise their homespace. It recognises that people not only enjoy having more space but that people's attitudes towards home decoration have moved away from the immigrant mentality of "making do" with space towards higher design expectations. (Plate 6)

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91 This was as a result of creating multi-faceted facades allowing more external wall per flat hence improving ventilation and light.
92 Electricity supply in the Mark blocks was 2 Amp. per flat for lighting and small hand electrics In the Mark IV it was raised to 3 amps. Slab, H-Block, I Block and Twin Tower 4 - 8 amp with surface wiring. New Slab, Trident block and Linear 9A-12A. HOS Harmony and Concorde 18-20A allowing for full a/c.
93 "Responses to a Change in Aspirations" in Building Journal Hong Kong China, September 1988, pp. 88-92. With the introduction of the LTHS the Housing Authority issued a brief to the Government outlining considerations in its proposals. These include: changes in flat sizes, and mix of flats within the estates; "total revision of how designs address households' housing requirements"; greater interchangeability between rental and HOS designs. Building services considerations conclude: upgraded electricity; piped gas - to do away with bottled gas; centralised water meters. Site planning criteria include: 3.8 persons/flat occupancy - an average gross population of 2,600 persons/ha.
94 Stephen Poon, op., cit., p. 42
95 The Harmony Blocks use pre-fabricated panels and standardised internal fixtures to increase productivity and reduce cost.
Each unit is provided with adequate power supply to enable the customers to install air-conditioning in the living room and bedrooms. Water supply, gas supply, telephone connection, and communal TV aerial are all basic installation for each and every unit."

HKHA architects are concerned with “home-making” on a massive scale. The programme currently houses 3.2 million people, with over 65,000 flats produced a year - an average of one flat built every 8 minutes. The HKHA “creates and develops communities” and is responsible for the design, construction and, maintenance of schools, sports halls, community halls, factories and multi-storey car parks. Interior design is largely left to tenants to do the complete fit-out to what was basically an empty shell.

The HKHA now produce award-winning designs. Architectural concerns for housing range from the detail of internal finishes to the whole landscaping and neighbourhood complex. They are expected to build efficiently at high density but to keep construction costs as low as possible. Over the past forty years the architectural division has built up considerable, and unique knowledge in this area.

One of the problems with the professional discourse of HKHA homes is that design is invariably read as architecture. The interior profession has had little impact, interest or engagement with these kinds of spaces. Home decoration has not been taken seriously as design since it is normally carried out by non-professionals on a limited budget.

The HKHA homes are normally depicted as an architectural development and shown in model or plan rather than as represented space. It is has been an architectural drawing convention, and failing, that homespace is normally professionally communicated in plan form - a two-dimensional view of a three dimensional space. A plan describes the physical occupation of floor space but is a highly selective representation, omitting data that applies specifically to post-occupancy space. Thus this lack of interest in what happens to domestic space from the professional design perspective has further created a gap in the knowledge, which has gone unnoticed as a design concern.

― Stephen Poon, op. cit., p. 43

54
Academic Discourse

The strange becomes familiar and the familiar becomes strange.\(^9\)

Having read everything there is to read on the subject of Hong Kong housing it should be expected that familiarity with the body of knowledge should reflect the subject as a whole. But being versed in the facts, figures, dates, policies and events associated with housing still leaves the reader none the wiser about everyday experience of Hong Kong domestic density. Other authors\(^10\) have pointed out most academic research is "depressingly similar. Research tends to concentrate on the phenomenon of density and the immensity of the problem of housing yet ignores post-occupancy representation and the home as a legitimate space treating density as if it were only a concern for planners and architects.

Academic publications on housing are aimed at an academic reader. They convey a weighty air of serious research sadly lacking in anecdotal experience. Most of these authoritative texts\(^10\) are based on surveys conducted over twenty years ago - which, in the history of modern Hong Kong makes it problematic to rely to heavily on these as sources. For example, since Mitchell’s famous study of density was carried out in the early 1960’s a whole generation has grown up, they are better educated, they live in new housing forms and there has been a whole shift in consumer behaviour within the home. This must be a factor in the way people conceive of density, the home, and lifestyle and a consideration in a study of Hong Kong housing.

Home-based studies in other countries have responded more readily up to the importance of everyday space. The built environment is no longer considered to be a static, unchanging object that can be understood with the aid of a plan or a table of statistics. It is disappointing that within the existing body of knowledge on Hong Kong housing there is no exploration of homespace as a holistic experience. Research in the field has adopted a conventional account of housing and density. The main anthology on Hong Kong housing,\(^10\) for example, is a multi disciplinary study, which makes little attempt to explore the relationship of people and place. As research it limits the reader to factual data.

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10. Alan Smart, Making Room: Squatter Clearance in Hong Kong, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University, 1992.
10. As a British Colony, most of the official documentation was written in English. This makes it relatively easy for a non-Chinese speaking researcher to conduct research but narrows the range of available material to official sources and, unconsciously, may reinforce the same ideas.
usefulness of such studies is questionable and does not further the understanding of real life experience.

One recent publication Home of Yesterday\textsuperscript{102} by its title should be a good read with insight into Hong Kong way of life. It is a disappointingly banal text, reiterating the official discourse, rehashing the same old knowledge. The dullness of the text however, contrasts with the excellent documentary photographs by Chan Chik. The difference in the quality of discourse between text and images is striking. The text is what we are told, the images help us to interpret what we want to know.

In research it is easy to become fixated with representing facts in the pursuit of accuracy rather than recognising everyday experience and what it might mean to live with density. The difficulty here has been in the way the Hong Kong homespace has been perceived and in the ability of academics to examine this experience as a legitimate knowledge of space.

Hong Kong density appears to hold more fascination for those who have the least experience of it. Richardson's\textsuperscript{103} study of housing in North Point is a case in point. It reveals a cultural outsider's fascination for representation in high-density domestic space as a centre of domestic activity, and significantly, as a place that is inhabited by Hong Kong people.

Over the years the average Hong Kong home evolved from a crowded, congested space, to a small featureless room and eventually to a compact flat. In the past the lack of space made nonsense of conventional western notions of design standards and it was assumed design had no place in a squatting hut, a crowded tenement or a Mark I block. However, a recent study\textsuperscript{104} has shown renewed interest in the way small space is utilised and is one of only two\textsuperscript{105} known post-occupancy studies that attempt to investigate space utilisation in the contemporary Hong Kong home. Both studies focus on the tenants' spatial organisation. However, Tong's study goes further by using photographs of the interior to show the representation of space. The inclusion of images provides insight beyond the

\textsuperscript{102} Peter K.W. Fong & Chan Chik, Home of Yesterday, Hong Kong: Joint Publishing (HK) Ltd. 1993

\textsuperscript{103} Tim Richardson, North Point Hong Kong: A Case Study of High Density, a six-month research study sponsored by the HK Government, Hong Kong Land, Co. The Architectural Association and the Royal Institute of British Architects.

\textsuperscript{104} Chinese University Hong Kong Architecture Department research project, as a report prepared on behalf of the Hong Kong Housing Authority. See: Brian Yamaguchi Sullivan, "Inhabiting Public Housing in Hong Kong: Design Guidelines Based on Residents' Living patterns in Existing Flats" in proceedings Housing for Millions The Challenge op. cit., pp. 250-5

\textsuperscript{105} Jim, K.P. Tong, Space Utilization in Estate Flats and Their Immediate Surroundings, University of Hong Kong, Masters Thesis, 1970. This study concentrates on different layouts within flats in So Uk Estate in the late 1960's.
written text provides the reader with more information and greater insight into the space. Design in the home is thus evident in various forms; material culture, soft furnishings, through the use of specific materials and in the quality of interior space.
CHAPTER 2
DISCOURSES OF DENSITY
A Culture of Density

The streets in the Upper and Central rings are closely lined with imposing shops. Passers-by are so numerous that they are constantly jostling against each other, and it is both noisy and dusty.¹

This is the way of urban Hong Kong. It is cramped by the force of nature, but it is irresistibly restless by instinct.²

Wang Tao’s description of nineteenth century Hong Kong shows how little street-life has changed. Every travel writer who has ever visited Hong Kong will be sure to write of the frenetic energy, the buzz and unremitting vivacity of citylife. Density translates into human activity, the constant movement and noise a stimulus to the senses, the social fabric and vibrancy of the citylife bound up with its density.

It is like a caldron, seething, hissing, hooting, arguing, enmeshed in a labyrinth of tunnels and overpasses, with those skyscrapers erupting everywhere into view... with a car it seems for every square foot of roadway, with a pedestrian for every square inch of sidewalk... all in all, with a pace of life so unremitting, a sense of movement and enterprise so challenging, that one’s senses are overwhelmed by the sheer glory of human animation³.

There are apparent contradictions in Morris’s description. Superlatives abound yet these are marked by ambiguity. She describes a city that is unremitting, yet this only heightens the experience, making it more intense, and more exciting. It has the “sheer glory of human animation” but “there is a pedestrian for every square inch of sidewalk”. She describes the design as “inchoate”, the architecture of a mixed character, yet concludes that Hong Kong is “astonishingly beautiful”. (Plate 7)

High density is normally viewed as an extreme form of urban pathology, congestion and crowding. But here, it is shown to be vibrant, exciting and a dynamic aspect of city life. Thus, the context of a Western understanding of density and overcrowding in Hong Kong exposes the problematic of language. Conventional Western categories of description are inadequate when it comes to representing Hong Kong density. The experience of Hong Kong density exposes its paradoxes and full range of interpretation: it can be positive and negative; exhilarating and overwhelming; an exciting or everyday experience.

¹ Wang Tao, “My Sojourn in Hong Kong” in Barbara-Sue White (ed) Hong Kong: Somewhere between Heaven and Earth, Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 63
² Jan Morris, “Hong Kong” in John & Kirsten Miller (eds.) Hong Kong, San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1994, p. 21
³ Ibid., p. 27
Plate 7
the garish merry signs the clamorous shop-fronts, the thickets of TV aerials, the banners, the rows of shiny hanging ducks, the washing on poles,...the fantastic crimson- and-gold facades of restaurants, the flickering television screens in shop windows....the smells of cooking, spice, incense, oil, the racket of radio music and amplified voices, the half shouted conversation that is peculiar to Chinese meeting one another in the street, the ceaseless clatter of spoons, coins, mah-jongg counters, abaci, hammers, and electric drills. It can appear exotic to visitors, but it is fundamentally a plain and practical style. 

Density, is essentially part of the place, the space and the experience of Hong Kong. The travel writer's impressions are heightened by the phenomenon of so much happening in a such a small space: buildings tightly packed together and people crowded at street level. Visitors see Hong Kong as an curious outsider stimulated by those things they see as being different from their own cultural and spatial experience. The writer responds to the peculiar amidst the familiar, remarking on the exotic and the bizarre.

Admittedly, it is difficult to describe Hong Kong without resorting to clichés. And, just because it has been said over and over again, that is not to say it is not true.

There's lots to see in Hong Kong. In fact there are more sights, sounds and happenings per square kilometre than anywhere else in the world.

The Hong Kong Tourist Association prefer to represent as being “compact”, rather than “dense” and use it as a selling point which makes shopping, dining, and sightseeing all within easy reach. The architect, Terry Farrell, also remarked on this phenomenon in a recent symposium. The concentration of the urban areas in Hong Kong has left higher areas of undeveloped space than, for example in London, where the sprawling urban space, is more or less equivalent to the green areas in Hong Kong. In Hong Kong Island there are stretches of country park less than fifteen minutes away from the city centre.

For all that it lacks space Hong Kong is a centre of prosperity and wealth. There is a higher concentration of Rolls Royce's, mobile telephones and millionaires per sq. mile than anywhere else in the world. This contradicts any hypothesis that density and poverty are somehow mutual, or that a high density population restricts economic growth. There is an

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2 HKTA leaflet. "Sightseeing" published January 1987
3 *Cities of the Future*, a symposium organised by the British Council, February 1997
4 *Sunday Morning Post*, January 12, 1997 Recent reports show there is a widening gap between rich and poor which, if the trend keeps up, Hong Kong could be classified as a third world city in terms of its disparity of wealth.
unselfconsciousness that adds to the vibrancy to the place. It is a city of contradictions and peculiar juxtapositions of old and new, wealth and poverty. In the street lean-to's sit happily alongside monumental buildings, pushcarts might be parked alongside luxury cars. Density is experienced in crowded street markets, looking across to rooms in another building, looking down at other rooftops, inside windowless offices, in lifts, and trains. Density also brings people closer together visually, aurally, mentally and physically.

Everyday contact takes place in its own space. This space is anthropocentric. At its centre there is always a human being living an everyday life. It is his everyday life. It is his everyday life that articulates his space, in which experience of space and perception of space are indissolubly fused together.

Hong Kong urban density gives the consumer a greater choice of shops in a concentrated area. In their daily life people move through density spaces, making contact with other and people and space. Shops are generally open until late attract crowds into the busy streets creating lively areas for evening entertainment. There are also said to be more than 6,000 restaurants in Hong Kong, more per head than anywhere else in the world. With these advantages of living in high density Hong Kong people have got used to the convenience of density which gives more choices in dining and shopping and short travel distances.

Density is not without its visual appeal. Victoria Harbour might be a less spectacular were it not for the high density of the tall buildings set on the steep slopes. It is urban density, rather than the country parks that people remember about Hong Kong and makes the most outstanding images. Postcards of Hong Kong show crowded street scenes of neon signboards and market stalls, crowded trams, illegal extensions and more recently, one postcard showing Slab Public Housing blocks with laundry hanging on poles to dry.

Against Density

Foreigners who move to Hong Kong without expatriate status find the high rental costs and limited choice of accommodation an eye-opener. For those whose experience of

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The top 10 per cent of households shares 42 per cent of the territory's gross income, while the bottom 50 per cent shares just 19 per cent of the wealth, according to the Hong Kong Social Security Society.

* For example, an Australian friend (single) who moved into a 300 square foot, two-bedroom apartment went to great lengths to organise the space as simply as possible by keeping furnishing to a minimum. She could not imagine how the family of six living in the flat opposite managed to fit into the same space.
dwelling is based on Western spatial standards it is difficult to find somewhere affordable of an equivalent standard. Westerners, are generally willing to pay more in rent to live somewhere less crowded. And, in order to have more homespace in a quiet environment they are normally more inclined than local people to put up with the inconvenience of commuting from outlying islands, or rural areas.

Density affects the society and in turn society affects the representation of density. Before it was demolished in 1993 the Kowloon Walled City was viewed as a building phenomenon and described as an “organic megastructure”\(^\text{10}\). This was a place that was created without any reference to building regulations or intervention from architects or planners. It was a prime example of evolutionary architecture. It was a slum on a grand scale. At the time it was demolished it was found to be home to over 33,000 people.\(^\text{10}\) Indeed, the values of many families living here were found to be no different from families living in public housing: to work hard, earn a living, school their children.

The main problem though, is just how much dirtier the whole place is. There are rats all over the place....We shall have a cleaner environment but it is going to be more expensive. It will be much better for the children of course, but it will be difficult to move; for all its problems, we have got used to the Walled City.\(^\text{10}\)

What we do not tell from this is whether they preferred to put up with these conditions because they had got used to the Walled City itself, (community or space) or to the low rent, or both. The visibly appalling conditions were easily articulated as a communicable spatial knowledge. However, these residents appear to be finding it more difficult to articulate deeper concerns. They appear to be thinking aloud, comparing the space they know and trying to imagine themselves in new surroundings. Dwelling in density or poor conditions clearly still a legitimate and meaningful experience. Most countries can cite

\(^{10}\) Ironically, the Kowloon walled city, arguably among the worlds worst living conditions, and the epitome of bad design, became a well-studied focus of architectural research. As a building phenomenon there has been nothing quite like it since the structure could never have been created through the application of a conventional architectural knowledge. Visually one may draw vague comparisons externally to a more concentrated version of the Byker wall, and internally to the underground habitation such as in the film Terminator.

\(^{11}\) Greg Girard & Ian Lambot, City of Darkness: Life in Kowloon Walled City, Hong Kong: Watermark, 1993, frontispiece

To capture the flavour of the Walled City on the printed page has been an interesting challenge. Its density, its unexpectedness, its smells, its sounds and changing textures are difficult, if not impossible to convey. The decision to use interviews was an early one. It always struck me that it was the people who lived and worked there who were the key to its extraordinary nature, as much as the place itself.

\(^{12}\) Ibid., p 117
examples of people who prefer to stay in older slum neighbourhoods or in dilapidated old family homes rather than move to a better place.

Building For Density

Geographically, only one third of the total Hong Kong landmass is used for building and Holland, by comparison, has a more densely populated landmass. Until suitable sites can be re-deployed, or created, the population is unevenly distributed throughout the Territory concentrated in densely packed urban areas. (Plate 8)

Building land in Hong Kong is not found, it is made; either hacked out of the hills or created by reclamation.

By the late nineteen fifties it was clear to the Hong Kong Government that the inner-city areas could not sustain the growing population. People wanted to live close to where they worked which created demand and pressure on existing buildings in the urban area. The Government were forced to review the land capabilities and plan for a population that could be shifted from high urban density areas to New Towns created in the New Territories. The expansion of New Towns into the country areas built to a lower plot ratio has enabled the HKCHA to provide bigger homes to an improved design.

Few people in Hong Kong would ever consider that there might be any alternative to high rise housing. The Western ideal of semi-detached suburbia has only been ever been a restricted option for private sector housing in selective areas. Ma On Shan, once a rural peninsula in Sai Kung has been transformed into a veritable metropolis. The Government could have planned for low density housing or created a suburbia, instead Ma On Shan was planned as a dormitory town without industry and residential accommodation in the form of high skyscrapers have sprung up almost overnight on land that was once undesirable and inaccessible. Ma On Shan is attractive as a newly developed residential

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"C.K. Lau, "Overdrawn at the Land Bank", South China Morning Post, July 20, 1996

The Territorial Development Strategy Review (TDSR) revealed the Government’s fears that there will not be sufficient land to sustain Hong Kong’s growth. 86% of the existing land has been developed or else deemed unsuitable for development: country parks (43.2 per cent), hilly country (18 per cent), existing and planned urban areas (24 per cent) and conservation zones like Mai Po (0.8 per cent). The remaining 14 per cent of rural lowland areas may not be suitable to be developed: village settlements, unplanned container storage sites, flood-prone lowland areas, abandoned land, pig and chicken farms, golf courses, fish ponds “fung shui” areas, burial grounds, wrecked car dumps, sites of special scientific interest etc. This leaves a maximum of 3,111 hectares of land which could be developed. the government maintains there is no alternative but to continue with harbour reclamation. Green groups have labelled the report as “Government Propaganda” and independent studies are examining alternatives.

"Hong Kong Annual Report Hong Kong: Government Press, 1956, p. 8
area. It represents good value for money in terms of cost of space per square foot, however, the sustained higher cost in the urban areas indicates a stronger desire to live centrally where the locale is more convenient and more established.

When Shatin New Town was first built, people were reluctant to move out from their crowded homes in the urban area to spacious new homes in such an underdeveloped area. Hills and Yeh\(^{15}\) point out, the main weakness with such a housing-led programme in the New Towns lay with the failure to attract sufficient industry and employment to the area. In effect these New Towns form a commuter belt to the urban centres where people still have a greater choice of jobs. As a result, the main arteries of transport become severely congested at peak times and density increases in the central areas during the day.

It must be recognised that the NT is no longer a rural hinterland of Hong Kong as it is now a growth corridor between two major cities: Hong Kong (6.3 million) and Shenzhen (3.3 million).\(^{16}\)

It has been estimated that Hong Kong will have a population of 8.1 million by the year 2011 and 12 million towards 2047. The problem of creating enough space for a growing population continues to be a concern and poses a threat, for the future growth of Hong Kong. Reclamation of the harbour has been presented as the best option by the TDSR but this has been questioned on environmental grounds. The only other answer seems to be to create potential strategic growth areas in rural areas to continue to redistribute population areas throughout the Territory and to maintain a highly efficient use of space through high-density residential areas.

The Government faces several problems. First, with the rise in consumer expectations for better quality housing they are obliged to provide space for tenants on par with the private sector. The only way they can continue to do this is to raise the number of storeys and plot ratios in order to make it cost effective. Secondly, the steady growth in population means that the quality of life in urban areas may deteriorate further. Environmental problems associated with sewage are bound to further affect the Territory. Finally, the existing low densities in the New Territories may have to be reviewed if the balance between recreational land, industry and residential space is to be maintained.

\(^{15}\) Peter Hills & Anthony G.O. Yeh, " New Town Developments in Hong Kong", Built Environment, vol.9, nos. 3/4 pp. 266-277, 1983

\(^{16}\) Ho Chi Wing, "Harbour Reclamations; Response to the Territorial Development Strategy Review" Hinge, vol.33, April 1997
The Hong Kong Chinese Family

It is bewildering, to an outsider, how, despite the constraints of space, such smartly dressed people manage to emerge every morning from public housing estates. Clearly Hong Kong people's lifestyle, consumer choices, social class and their standards of dwelling do not equate as one might expect of low-income families in the West. Low-income public housing in Hong Kong is by no means a stigma of poverty, and does not necessarily predetermine or preclude status or social activity.

The brutal facts of occupied space do not rule out the idea that the home is more than just a functional space. The space may be small but it as the centre of family dwelling it must still need to be ordered in some way to facilitate so many people living together and where residents make aesthetic choices.

The ability of Hong Kong people to cope with high density appears to be deeply rooted in a cultural disposition. However, there is a danger in describing the Chinese family as if it were fixed in tradition without recognising how that culture has changed. Confucian attitudes can still be traced within the Hong Kong family but this is being challenged by modern, Western, attitudes.

As Topley points out, in the past it was the ideal, and goal, of every family to be self-sufficient; to provide for a high degree of family solidarity. And, while the family head was still alive, it was important not to feel obliged to anyone outside the family but to cope with domestic problems without inviting outside interference. In a purely agrarian context, family kinship meant that all members, including women, worked on the land concentrating efforts towards the collective good of all. The family unit had priority over the individual and it was expected that the collective wealth of the family would be re-invested towards the purchase of land to accommodate the extended family. Salaff confirmed this attitude of collective wealth still existed in the 1970's.

Mae felt responsible for her family's economic situation. Very close to her parents emotionally, Mae willingly subordinated her personal goals to their view of family needs. She saw very few contradictions between her personal work ambitions and the economic needs of her family.18

Anderson's study of Chinese living in Penang found that much overcrowding was voluntary and a small household was considered to be a sign of poverty or misfortune. While this may be true of Malaysian families, Mitchell claims that this was not true for all Chinese families. Domestic crowding generally occurs among members of the same family, which may account for a tolerance of a crowded space that would not normally accommodate strangers. Anderson found Chinese family members were not expected to have need of a private space within the home, domestic space was primarily centred around social activities. Within the Chinese family people were used to being together at all times; bedrooms for example, were used only for sleeping and never occupied during the day. He concludes that Chinese have developed coping mechanisms within their cultural system to allay stress that is well suited to a high density situation. In the Chinese family everyone had a sense of their own hierarchical position, which meant family relationships were controlled by status and respect towards a senior hierarchy. How then are these coping mechanisms acquired? Ward describes one possible method. "Adults will ignore a child, who is having a temper tantrum, until they learn to become more self controlled. The child comes to realise that such aggressive behaviour should be restrained. Ward suggests that this early training in self restraint must help people to adapt to crowded conditions where frustration and lack of privacy might otherwise lead to undue stress - within the family and with neighbours."

Environmental Arousal

Noise in a household is the sign of life and action, and the household moves in a shimmering ambiance of sound from waking to sleep. Radios, games of mahjong...children playing or crying, cats and other producers of loud sounds are always present, I have never heard anyone complain about noise in a Chinese household. Noise is desirable or at worst ignored. Chinese people are observed to thrive on social occasions with large groups of people.

1 E.N. Anderson jr., "Some Chinese Methods of Dealing with Crowding", Urban Anthropology, vol. 1, (2) 1972 pp. 141-150 Anderson cites the example of a wealthy man who took over a large house and instead of allocating more space to individuals he allocated more individuals to the space.
2 Robert E. Mitchell, "Residential Patterns & Family Networks", International Journal of Sociology of the Family, vol. 2, no. 2 September 1972, pp. 212-224. The joint family was considered to be the ideal in China while the stem and nuclear families were the most common forms. Large households were more prevalent in urban areas than in rural places.
4 E.N. Anderson jr., op. cit., p. 146
They are aroused by noise and crowds, in a way that many Westerners cannot comprehend, and often shun places with low-lighting levels or which are considered to be too quiet. Chinese restaurants are designed to be a stimulating environment where large groups of people can meet in a casual and lively atmosphere and where the number of people further adds to the visual and aural stimulus of movement and noise. Lighting levels in local restaurants also tend to be high with a mix of several different kinds of lighting to heighten visual interest.

It is important to differentiate between density and crowding. Density refers to an occupied space. It is usually expressed in terms of numbers of people per acre or kilometre. It is a quantitative measure of occupied space devoid of psychological meaning. Crowding is a psychological state; it is a subjective experience and refers to a “feeling” of having very little space; normally to a feeling crowded by other people.

According to Freedman’s “density-intensity” theory, crowding “serves to intensify the individual’s typical reactions to the situation”. Someone who is ordinarily pre-disposed to a high certain level of crowding should not suffer stress in high density situation. If someone ordinarily has a negative response to being too close to people this feeling will be intensified with stronger negative effects. The sense of crowding does not only relate to being surrounded by other people but also to the level of environmental stimulus within the space, of which the interior design is only one component. Excessive levels of arousal such as bright lights and loud noise may be perceived by some to be environmental stimulus overload, which can cause stress and, under certain circumstances, can exert negative effects on behaviour. This is a subjective experience, which significantly appears to vary across different cultures. Hong Kong people, for example, appear to enjoy the stimulus of other people, bright lights and noise. Many public spaces such as restaurants, coffee shops and certain shops, are designed to reflect a pre-disposition to a particular environmental quality.

Any suggestion that one culture might require, or positively enjoy less space than another raises charges of insensitivity or worse, cultural imperialism. It might be acceptable for

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2 While this may be true for older people who are generally less educated than the younger generation. Younger people who are well travelled and have been exposed to different types of environments are often receptive to more Western style environments.

23 A typical Chinese restaurant might have, for example: chandeliers, a coffered ceiling, spotlights, downlights and wall lights.


Y.K. Chan as a local Chinese to make statements about density that could not be made so easily by a cultural outsider without accusations of eurocentricism, or colonialism. For example, in his study of life satisfaction in a crowded urban environment Chan was able to make the following conclusion.

In other words, people living in high density areas, in more crowded households, do not necessarily feel being more crowded in their living environment, less enjoyable to be surrounded by a lot of people, or stronger spatial constraint.  

Chan found that density of living space has a negligible effect on the individual’s life satisfaction, and people do not feel it interferes with their behaviour. Although they have not articulated density as being a problem it does not mean they do not enjoy space, or that they do not desire more space. Another way of looking at this might be that they do not perceive space to be crowded because in Hong Kong they have never experienced an environment, which is not crowded.

Chan’s study exposes some of the problems of relying on language within a questionnaire. He asked residents to summarise their response within a three point rating system: satisfied, not satisfied and neutral. Thus, the question “do you find it enjoyable to be surrounded by a lot of people” might have been construed by residents within the context of large family gatherings rather than in an everyday context. Chan admits that these results raise more questions. Why is it that Hong Kong people are not adversely affected by the crowded living environment? He suggests respondents make judgements by referring to what they have achieved against what they previously had, and what they feel is possible for them to achieve. Tim Richardson’s study found that while respondents agreed there were too many people in Hong Kong only 21% said that density affected their daily lives. His conclusion was that Hong Kong people could tolerate much smaller space standards than their Western counterparts, but that this was an adaptation rather than acceptance.

Tolerance of Density

..in one small flat four people playing mahjong, one watching the game, two watching television, one on the phone, one doing homework in an

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28 Tim Richardson, North Point: A Case Study of High Density, 1977, study sponsored by the AA, RIBA, HK Government and HK Land
adjacent room, one taking a shower. Eleven people including me, undertaking six different activities, and yet the situation was very comfortable and ordinary. 

For Richardson as a cultural outsider, the everyday activities of a Hong Kong family were remarkable. It felt unusual for him to be surrounded by so many people, and strange that he could adapt to a situation where everyone is comfortable with high density. Hong Kong people are generally tolerant of living in small space and make few complaints which suggests they are either relatively happy with their situation, that they feel they have no choice or they are not complaining people.

In Lai's study, conducted in one of the earliest public housing estates, over ninety percent of the families interviewed said they did not mind living in high density resettlement buildings. They accepted that the level of density was inevitable for Hong Kong because of the lack of building space and the high population. Residents did feel, however, they suffered from overcrowding and ill-health, especially in the summer. Lai attributes this spatial sensibility to an Asian mentality, particular to the Chinese. He suggests it was not specifically the lack of space that caused frustrations but rather the poor housing conditions and lack of facilities, faults which people could directly identify and which could be fixed. He observes if Western people had to live in these conditions they would not cope so well and would be likely to have a social and mental breakdown.

The Mark I blocks, where Lai's study was carried out would appear to have all the ready-made features for a major housing disaster. Based on experiences of Western cities it would be expected that there would be visible evidence of social pathology. In general,

29 Ibid., p. 138

One of the most crowded resettlement blocks in Chai Wan Estate is Block 18. It is a standard H-shaped seven-storey Mark 1 block that covers a ground area of about 16,000 square feet. In March, 1973, the block accommodated 462 families which consisted of 2,594 persons. The population density of the Block was therefore about 16 persons per 100 square feet of ground area. This approximates a density of over 4.5 million persons per square mile!

33 Chuen-Yan, David Lai, op. cit., In May 1973 43 per cent of the population of the Chai Wan Estate did not have the space standard of 24 square feet per adult. Lai found 513 families, nearly 3,400 people in all the resettlement estates, who had a living space less than 12 square feet per adult. While families would have been initially housed at a rate of 5 adults per 120 square feet room, (children under 10 counted for only half an adult). Consequently, crowded conditions would have worsened as children grew up the longer the family lived there.
families seem to be able to cope remarkably well with these conditions. Stephen Poon, acknowledges, in glowing terms, residents’ tolerance and the change in their expectations.

The main asset of Hong Kong is its people. They are hard working, entrepreneurial and most adaptable to the ever changing environment they live in. When public housing first started forty years ago, people were happy to have a little more than just a roof over their heads. With the passage of time, Hong Kong has prospered, people’s expectations have gone up. One thing, however, has remained almost the same all these years, and that is the joy of high density living. 34

The HKHA, of course, has its own agenda for defending the level of density - the “joy” of density. Lai also asserts Asian housing needs and design criteria cannot be viewed from a Western perspective. 35 He claims local people do not need, use or occupy space in the same way as in the west. It is a difficult to deny that this is not the case. But there is also a moral dilemma in using this defence to deny Hong Kong people a better quality of space though it also suggests the need for more research to discover how Hong Kong people use space in the home and to design specifically with those needs in mind.

Research into crowding and density has in the most part been based on studies of Western habitats and the behaviour of Western people. It is interesting to note how often Mitchell’s study on Hong Kong housing is used counteract set theories to show how even in the most densely populated cities density does not necessarily lead to social, mental or physical pathologies. The theory is, if this is true of people in Hong Kong then it is not density per se that is the problem but the way density is perceived in the cultural habitat. In the Summer of 1967 when Mitchell’s study was conducted, much of the Hong Kong population was comprised of new immigrants, housing was in short supply and the Territory was experiencing social instability, riots and water shortages. The fact that people did not articulate psycho-pathological stress related to density may have been balanced by other, more pressing concerns. As Sister Mary-Edna Brophy, a Canadian missionary sister working in the resettlement areas of Kowloon, recalls the Hong Kong tolerance of density was not easy for a Westerner, to understand; even for someone who had lived and worked closely with the community.

34 Stephen Poon, op. cit., p. 41
35 Chuen-Yan David Lai, op. cit., p.175
Therefore without modifications, the criteria for population density, low-cost housing quality, and planning approaches developed in Western countries cannot be applied to Asian nations.
In the early estates like Shek Kip Mei and Lok Fu there was so little space. One day, when visiting a family near Ngau Tau Kok, I asked how five of them could live in such a small area. "You Westerners will never understand" the father said. "We don't care how small it is as long as we have freedom."
That was around 1966.  

Richardson was also advised that he would have to shift his way of perceiving density:

You mustn't look at it from your Western point of view, you must look at life through their eyes. Anything that they have now, their clothes, their food, their shelter, is Heaven when they look back to the time when they had nothing at all.  

Millar discovered that those who suffered the least from high density living tended to be older, less well-educated and raised in China. People who had a more traditional upbringing and were new immigrants to Hong Kong had a greater capacity to withstand high density - suggesting that their main pre-occupation, as immigrants, was with daily life concerns associated with building a life in Hong Kong. Schmitt found two thirds of households surveyed in 1957 expressed satisfaction with their accommodation. He suggests this may have been due to the fact, that bad as they were, these housing conditions were better than they had experienced in China.  

Much of the successful tolerance of high densities and overcrowding stems from long-established Chinese traditions, British officials have noted a remarkable affinity for close quarters among the Chinese populace, which they ascribe partly to a natural gregariousness and partly to an inability to pay the transportation costs implicit in reduced densities. Family cohesiveness imposes strict controls, observed even by single persons away from home.  

Hong Kong people were clearly fatalistic about their housing alternatives. Given the seriousness of the housing problem public housing became a standard of affordable housing where the rent and level of facilities were generally a lot less than for an equivalent space in the private sector.  

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37 Interview with Sister Mary-Edna Brophy in Sally Blyth and Ian Wotherspoon, Hong Kong Remembers, Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 79  
38 Tim Richardson, op. cit., p. 122  
39 Millar, S.E. "Health and Well-being in Relation to High Density Living in Hong Kong," unpublished Ph.D Thesis, the Australian National University, 1976  
41 Ibid., p. 211  
42 Ibid., p. 216  

Many of the 687,209 households enumerated in the 1961 census were living in basements, cubicles, staircases, roof-tops, fishing craft, or other irregular accommodations.
Salaff encountered examples of families who could afford to buy or rent a bigger apartment yet chose to remain in cramped conditions, with the inconvenience of public facilities, because they wanted to invest in the future through their children’s education rather than to “squander” money on housing.43

As Hong Kong expanded, the early Resettlement estates had the advantage of being centrally located with convenient access to transport, schools and places of work. It may seem perverse to put up with poor living conditions, some families who could move to a bigger place might not welcome the disruption to their established routine or to move from a neighbourhood where they were established. In an interview with a former resident of a Mark I resettlement block the respondent spoke fondly of his childhood memories as one of a family of nine living in 120 sq. feet single room space. His parents were reluctant to move from this home where they had lived since 1958. They valued their community life and relationship with neighbours more than the quality of domestic space. They had got used to the space, which seemed bigger once the children had moved out, and were afraid of the disruption the move would make to their daily lives. Other tenants expressed concerns about the expense entailed in such a move, not least the expense of decoration. Hopkins’ research into families who refused to move from crowded conditions to a bigger home provides further insight into this phenomenon.44

With the trend towards higher education in Hong Kong, the rise in standard of living and the dissolution of Chinese cultural traditions it might be expected that attitudes to density, and low standards of housing will change. There are incidents where domestic crimes have been attributed to high density with families driven to violence because of an unreasonably cramped living space6 but given the extent of density in the Territory these incidents are relatively isolated.

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Hopkins carried out 5 case studies of families who refused to move. Mrs A lived in 60 sq. feet (half a room) shared by six persons. She refused to move because the room they were offered in the new estate was virtually the same size as the 10 sq. feet room (the other half was occupied by her brother and his wife). When the children turned 10 the family would be eligible for a bigger flat. Mrs A’s brother was not eligible for a flat of his own and if they moved they would be forced to divide the new flat. Mrs. B. lived in a 120 sq. feet room occupied by 8 persons. They lived in a ground floor room which they also used as a shop selling incense and burnt sacrifices. The family refused to move, despite the appallingly crowded conditions, because they were afraid they would lose their established trade if they moved to a new estate.
6 South China Morning Post, March 14, 1995. It was reported that “simmering tensions and cramped conditions in a 90-square-foot flat shared by three adults and three children drove a mother to beat her toddler”.

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Density is clearly not a straightforward problem of spatial occupancy and crowding. Mitchell found that the level of emotional strain increased whenever two families were forced to share a combined space. As space, and particularly dwelling space it presents several problems for spatial interpretation. Rapoport sets out guidelines to redefine the concept of density. In order to present a more accurate interpretation or reading of density he concludes thus:

It is essential to consider in detail, and to a high degree of specificity, the relationship of given socio-cultural groups to traditional density figures (people per unit area), the relationship of the particular area to the larger context, the specific activities taking place and their meaning, the detailed layout and design of the setting in terms of privacy ...the facilities available, the social characteristics of the area in terms of life style, homogeneity, the social rules available and used, and so on before density can be defined and the next step of evaluating it is tackled.

Rapoport is essentially talking about finding a useful knowledge of density. He points out that this knowledge of space is local and specific, and it requires a careful and sensitive understanding of the context in which it is received. Hong Kong presents a good example from which to learn from density, not just as a measure of people per unit but in terms of an occupied lived-in space. Clearly, if we are to redefine our knowledge of space we need to consider in detail the specific context of density instead of relying on assumptions.

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CHAPTER 3

THEORIES OF SPATIAL REPRESENTATION
Representing Space

For our house is our corner of the world. As has often been said, it is our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word.¹

The starting point for a study of space must be the issue of space itself. Most studies refer to Mircea Eliade's *The Sacred and The Profane* to establish a connection between man and space. According to Eliade’s theory, man is connected to space by his need to have, construct and be in space. Our world is a cosmos and when we build our world we imitate the work of the gods, the cosmogeny.

Establishment in a particular place, organizing it, inhabiting it, are acts that presuppose an existential choice— the choice of the universe that one is prepared to assume by “creating” it. Now, this universe is always the replica of the paradigmatic universe created and inhabited by the gods; hence it shares in the sanctity of the gods’ work.²

Even the most humble home is a cosmos. Every household is a unique spatial construction whereby the presence and placement of everyday objects are part of the cosmos. Everything that is part of that space, such as the television, beds, colour of the walls, floor finish, family ornaments and slippers contributes something to that space.

Eliade’s thoughts might seem too abstract to apply to a real life context. There appears to be little connection to everyday domestic space. The concepts do, however, explain how the act of spatial appropriation engages the individual with that space and it follows that the process of transforming a space into a home must be a meaningful act. As Relph points out:

Existential or Lived space is the inner structure of space as it appears to us in our concrete experiences of the world as members of a cultural group. It is intersubjective and hence amenable to all members of that group for they have all been socialised according to a common set of experiences, signs and symbols. The meanings of existential space are therefore those of a culture as experienced by an individual rather than a summation of the meanings of individual perceptual spaces, though in many case the two probably coincide. Furthermore existential space is not merely a passive space waiting to be experienced, but is constantly being created and remade by human activities.³

Home is experienced as a taken-for-granted world, a place where residents can simply “be” in the space. An individual’s response to lived space is a concrete experience of the world. We understand lived space without having to think about it. It is bound up with existence and awareness of self. A lived space is a familiar space. Everything within that space, the ordinary, familiar and mundane is unconsciously absorbed holistically.

The theoretical error is to be content to see space without conceiving of it, without concentrating discrete perceptions by means of a mental act, without assembling details into a whole “reality”, without apprehending contents in terms of their interrelationships within the containing forms.

Lefebvre points out, it would be “trite” to stress lived space only to elevate it to the level of theory. Instead, he suggests that it should partake of the theoretical sphere. He warns, if space is considered in purely theoretical, or epistemological, terms, real space, is transformed into a mental space which becomes the Knowledge of philosophers and epistemologists creating an “abyss” between mental space and real space. Over-theorising the lived qualities of space loses the significance and quality of lived space itself. Any attempt to define a lived space presents a philosophical problem. There is the theoretical philosophical musing of space as space. But there is also the quality of diffidence that can come from being able to take space for granted and having no reason to think about it or to query its existence. It is therefore problematic to question domestic space, as an object since this approach effectively dismisses the subjective way in which space is experienced and perceived.

Norberg-Schulz identifies five categories of existential space which can be useful to explain how the individual interacts with space.

We have so far distinguished between five space concepts: the pragmatic space of physical action, the perceptual space of immediate orientation, the existential space which forms man’s stable image of his environment, the cognitive space of the physical world and the abstract space of pure logical relations. Pragmatic space integrates man with his natural “organic” environment, perceptual space makes him belong to a social and cultural totality, cognitive space means that he is able to think about space and logical space, finally, offers the tool to describe the others.

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2 Ibid., p. 3
3 No limits at all have been set on the generalization of the concept of mental space: no clear account of it is ever given and, depending on the author one happens to be reading, it may connote logical coherence, practical consistency, self-regulation and the relations of the parts to the whole, the engendering of like in a set of places, the logic of container versus contents, and so on.

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It is highly unlikely residents would be able to articulate or differentiate between each of these theoretical concepts, but for the purpose of relating to spatial representation they help to explain some of the complexities and subtleties of spatial perception. It is interesting to note how different processes combine to create a holistic existential sense which links the individual to a space to the culture, to knowledge of space and their ability to think and articulate space. Each of these concepts contributes to the way occupants see, and relate to their homescape but to theorise over each one separately would detract from the holistic sense of existential space. The qualities that are important to lived space therefore might not be visible or physical but may be represented in the space through habits, practices and routines.

**Phenomenology**

Only if we are capable of dwelling, only then can we build.⁷

Phenomenology strives for the actualisation of contact in everyday situations; to see space as it is perceived⁸. It seeks to unbury the givenness of being in the world and the taken-for-granted nature of everyday life. Phenomenology recognises the importance of relating to the way space is experienced and provides the most appropriate theoretical base to consider taken-for-granted assumptions as they occur within our life-world⁹.

Merleau-Ponty¹⁰ points out that we must avoid saying that our body is in space or in time but rather that it inhabits space and time. Heidegger¹¹ questioning the nature of being claims Being is spatial. It is being-in-the-world. Man makes his home the centre of his existence through dwelling so that the house (home) becomes a focus of ontological security. However, Heidegger's thoughts on dwelling relate more to the concept of

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dwelling rather than directly to the physicality of dwelling in the home, or house – “dwelling” in the abstract, rather than dwelling in a real space.

Phenomenology highlights the context of the minutiae of lived-experience in its context: in the space and sequence in which it is enacted. But, as Merleau-Ponty points out, the non-determinancy of the lived world means that it cannot be fully explicated intellectually.

Of all the phenomenologists Bachelard best demonstrates how philosophy relates to the experience of dwelling and how this might be applied to a real space. Lived space, he explains, refers to our past as well as present experience.

We are the diagram of the functions of inhabiting that particular house and all other houses are but variations on a fundamental theme12.

Bachelard claims that the first home provides formative experiences that affect present and future experience. The individual’s experience of the first home is significant to the their interpretation of all space. Significantly, our earliest memories of home are of a place where we are surrounded by people and are rarely alone.

The house we were born in is an inhabited house13.

Memory, however, is unreliable since the quality of the remembered space may bear little relation to the actual physical space. Memories of home, for example, might be associated more with the people and community than the place itself. If the earliest dwelling was one room where the whole family slept together, where they worked on piece goods and as children played outside in the corridor, the home may be recalled as a setting for these memories.

We left Lok Fu in 1989 when the Government finally decided to demolish our housing estate and replace it with improved public housing we moved away from the area and took the opportunity to purchase a flat through the Home Ownership Scheme.... Living conditions there are a great deal better. There is more space and each flat has its own kitchen and bathroom, but the atmosphere is not the same. Everybody lives behind closed doors, and the same friendships do not exist. We don’t even know the names of our neighbours. My mother isn’t happy. She was sad to leave Lok Fu, having lived there for so many years.14

12 Gaston Bachelard, op., cit., p. 15
13 Ibid., p 14
14 Yuen Kong Ming, “My Home in Lok Fu” in Sally Blyth & Ian Wotherspoon (eds.), Hong Kong Remembers, Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1996, pp. 132-3
Bachelard muses on the house (for this we should read home) as a protected environment experienced through memory and daydreams. “It is a shelter for daydreams”. It is a place “where one can dream in peace”. Here, the most taken for granted elements in the space such as doors, corners and drawers are shown to be important to our experience of dwelling. He describes the “lived in” qualities of the corner of a room.

An imaginary room rises up around our bodies, which think that they are well hidden when we take refuge in a corner.15

It is Bachelard’s view that the past both real and imaginary is represented within the physical space. Dwelling is not just about the reality of space but its virtuality. It is made real in thoughts and dreams within the space. The individual’s engagement with the home is not confined by physical boundaries.

Bachelard, however, is disparaging about the quality of life where living in a space in the sky lacks cosmicity and relationship to the elements. He lauds the importance of verticality in a home and the presence of attics and cellars but, he maintains, this quality is lost in a high rise building.

They have no roots and, what is quite unthinkable for a dreamer of houses, sky-scrapers have no cellars. From the street to the roof, the rooms pile up one on top of the other, while the tent of a horizonless sky encloses the entire city. But the height of city buildings is a purely exterior one. Elevators do away with the heroism of stair climbing so that there is no longer any virtue in living up near the sky. Home has become mere horizontality...16.

This sentiment likely reflects Bachelard’s own eurocentric ideas of dwelling. In countries where high rise dwelling is a relatively uncommon form of dwelling the skyscraper might be viewed with suspicion and disdain. In Hong Kong where high-rise dwelling is the norm “the dreamer of houses” is more likely to have developed a sensibility to high rise space.

Bachelard’s way of looking at the mundane helps to shift preconceptions about the significance of ordinary things in ordinary places. His approach to spatial interpretation highlights qualities of space that would be impossible to detect through a quantitative spatial analysis, or on a plan. Clearly, the space cannot be discussed without due consideration of things within that space. As a philosopher, Bachelard appeals greatly to

15 Gaston Bachelard, op., cit., p. 137
16 Ibid., p. 27
designers. Anyone who can write of the house and universe while extolling the virtues of drawers, chests wardrobes, corners and roundness, must have a lively awareness of space is inspired by direct experience. Bachelard reveals how day-dreaming and allowing our mind to wander is essentially part of how we absorb and relate to being in a space. "Switching off" to space may also be an important psychological coping mechanism, placing the individual with a mental space within a space.

Things are foci within the space. They have a presence, a place and a reason for being in that space. The television might be the most obvious example; its placement indicating a dominant position in the room, its scale and type reflecting residents' preferred choice. If it is a new addition it stands out from everything else, over time, it becomes less noticeable and its place within the space is taken for granted because it belongs to a space.

Wardrobes with their shelves, desks with their drawers, and chests with their false bottoms are veritable organs of the secret psychological life. Indeed, without these "objects" and a few others in equally high favor, our intimate life would lack a model of intimacy. They are hybrid objects, subject objects. Like us, through us and for us, they have a quality of intimacy. 16

Lefebvre points out that things have a language of their own. It is a language that speaks of where they come from and why they are there. 18 Salaff's description of Syut-wa's room sets a scene.

Syut-wa's 8' by 8' windowless cubicle was separated from the living room and Aunt's bedroom by thin wooden partitions. Syut-wa arranged her space as neatly as possible: a bed, wardrobe, dresser and night table took up her entire floor space. Colored posters of Omar Sharif, Tom Jones, Alain Delon and Bruce Lee, the Cantonese karate exponent, adorned two walls. The third wall displayed several calendar-type photos of nude women on the beach and a large likeness of a female apparition floating in the wind. 19

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17 Ibid., p. 78
18 Henri Lefebvre op. cit., p. 80-81
To read a space is to read into the lifestyle and values of the residents; their aesthetic knowledge, their sense of spatial order and attitudes towards different objects; collections, clutter, mess and display. Above all, “things” and material culture provide a context and layer in space and time.

Experiencing Place

The home is assumed to be a physical centre (a cosmos) where people have a vested interest and will spend most of their time and is the point of origin and departure. Ley suggests the domestic sphere is the “core of the taken-for-granted world” but this quality only occurs in places that are significantly different from other spaces. It is a focus, that is, it must be inside a space. Bollnow too, maintains that man needs this inner space of the house to be protected and hidden, a place where he can be “relieved of continual anxious alertness”.

Time geography looks at the way people interact with space. It explores social reproduction through specific practices, which occur at determinate locations in time, and space through daily routine (place-ballet). Mundane, everyday activities such as bathing or dressing become associated with the place through routine. A sense of place is therefore rooted in day-to-day living where person and place is seen as a “unity” that is shaped by constraints and interaction with other people and objects.

Tuan and Relph support the idea of “place” as a means of understanding man’s connectedness with space. Buttimer sees place as an important part of human experience.
and the quality known as "At-homeness" as an essential quality of man's being. These are central themes to design(ers), seeking to understand spatial qualities that come from knowing, being and dwelling in space.

Relph suggests the important thing is not the identity of a place, but the "identity a person or group has with that place" and whether it is experienced as an insider or outsider.

To be inside a place and to experience it as completely as we can does not mean that existentially we are insiders. The most fundamental form of insideness is that in which a place is experienced without deliberate and self-conscious reflection yet is full with significances. Existential insideness characterises belonging to a place and the deep and complete identity with a place that is the very foundation of the place concept.

To experience existential insideness we must have an unequivocal sense that this is where we belong. If we have to question our sense of belonging it must mean we do not belong.

Geographical space, is "thought" rather than "lived". It is not space in real terms but rather a conception of space which affects man's orientation. It is through geographical space that the individual's identity is linked to politics and culture. Place has many different contexts, and different intensities of experience. As Harvey points out, in everyday speech there is an ambiguity, generality and multiple layers of meaning, in the way place is held together by social, political and spatial practices. Place may be a feeling but, according to Harvey, like space and time, it is a social construct and he suggests

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29 Anne Buttimer, Home, Reach, and the Sense of Place, in Anne Buttimer & David Seamon (eds.) op. cit.,
30 David Seamon, A Geography of the Lifeworld: Movement, Rest and Encounter, London: Croom Helm, 1979
31 E. Relph, op. cit., p 41
32 Although in our daily lives we may be largely unaware of the deep psychological and existential ties we have to the places where we live, the relationships are no less important for that. It may be that it is just the physical appearance, the landscape of a place that is important to us, or it may be an awareness of the persistence of place through time, or the fact that here is where we know and are known, or where the most significant experiences of our lives have occurred. But if we are really rooted in a place and attached to it, if this place is authentically our home, then all of these facets are profoundly significant and inseparable.
33 Ibid., p. 55
34 Ibid., p. 49-62 Existential outsideness, objective outsideness, incidental insideness, vicarious insideness, behavioural insideness, empathetic insideness & existential insideness.
35 David Harvey, "From Space to Place and Back Again: Reflections on the Condition of Postmodernity" in Jon Bird, Barry Curtis, Tim Putnam, George Robertson & Lisa Tickner (eds.) et al., (eds.) Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Change, London: Routledge, 1993
36 Ibid., p. 141

Places are fusions of human and natural order and are the significant centres of our immediate experiences of the world...Places are not abstractions or concepts but are directly experienced phenomena of the lived-world. They are important
there is a need to question by what social processes place is constructed. For example, Hong Kong's history is bound up with its geography and political identity. China may not have had direct political control over Hong Kong but its influence has always been felt, not just physically but emotionally. Place may be centred on Hong Kong but the home reach may be felt further afield.

Place construction should be about the recovery of roots, the recovery of the art of dwelling.

Hong Kong is now part of China and, for fifty years, it has been assured, nothing will change. However, rootedness to Hong Kong cannot be taken for granted. No one knows how stable or secure this place will be. Mass immigration and emigration has affected the social make up while fluctuations in political and economic concerns have affected the way local people relate to Hong Kong. However, as Relph notes, rootedness to a place is important to maintain psychological stability.

To have roots in a place is to have a secure point from which to look out on the world, a firm grasp of one's own position in the order of things, and a significant spiritual and psychological attachment to somewhere in particular.

There is much confusion and uncertainty with the change in sovereignty. People have concerns that Hong Kong might change and will no longer be the place they know. Their rootedness to Hong Kong has thus been tested by the perception that there is no secure point from which "to look out on the world". Place is linked with the economic, political and social conditions which has forced Hong Kong people to consider their long-term sense of security. Expatriates talk about when they might leave to go home, but their foreign passports make this decision a matter of timing rather than identity.

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sources of individual and communal identity, and are often profound centres of human existence to which people have deep and emotional psychological ties.

32 In the 1960's China allowed thousands of people through its borders to make their way to Hong Kong. The result was Hong Kong was flooded with a steady stream of refugees. It was a reminder that China could, at any point use its power over Hong Kong through the sheer might of its population. On an emotional level, Hong Kong people have been very quick to respond with aid whenever there is a natural disaster in China.

33 David Harvey, op. cit., p11

34 Yi-Fu Tuan, "Rootedness Versus Sense of Place" Landscape, no. 24, pp. 3-8, p. 5

Rootedness in its essence means being completely at home - that is, unreflectively secure and comfortable in a particular locality. It therefore excludes not only anxiousness and curiosity about what lies beyond the next hill, but also what lies beyond present time.

35 E. Relph, op., cit., p. 3
For local people the issue of whether to stay or emigrate is more significant. Conversation about emigration or passport applications is part of everyday life in Hong Kong. Everyone knows someone who is planning to leave, or has already left. For home owners whose capital is tied to fluctuations in house prices the question of when to sell can be affected by the political situation; to achieve maximum capital investment or a quick departure. For those who rent their homes their capital is liquid but with the boom in house prices home ownership is tempting. Any sense of rootedness to Hong Kong, therefore, must be linked to the individual's confidence in the future of the Special Administrative Region.

One country two systems should work. I do identify with Hong Kong, where I took ten years to adapt. When we are deprived of our freedom, I'll think about emigrating, although it could be too late. I won't think about it before '97.39

On an emotional level, Hong Kong people, who are themselves sojourners, may still feel a strong attachment to a village in China, where they may have immediate, extended or ancestral family40. Many people experience a cultural link to China as the mother land and rootedness to a place that is the home of their ancestral lineage. For many of the older generation this is important to their sense of personal identity. It is more than just nostalgia for the old country, but a deep cultural sense of belonging to a place. Although these people may have dwelt in Hong Kong for most of their lives they still think of this village as their real home. At Chinese New Year, for example, thousands of Hong Kong people travel to China weighed down with gifts for family and friends.41

Hong Kong is conceived as a geographical space connected to China. The border is a political division of space yet Hong Kong is physically part of China and Hong Kong people are Chinese. Hong Kong people have the freedom to travel but their counterparts over the border do not. China is a land of business opportunities, investment and cheap


40 Catherine Jones, Promoting Prosperity: The Hong Kong Way of Social Policy, Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1990, p. 40

41 In their urgency to leave post-war China 'typical' immigrants were young and able to leave behind most of their families, both living and dead. Once they decided to stay in Hong Kong it might have been more difficult for them to gather the whole family together again, or indeed, to convince older family members to leave the family grave.

42 Many older people still feel the attachment and security of belonging to a clan community and will refer to "my village", the place where they grew up. Even some younger people also refer nostalgically to their sense of belonging to a village they may never have visited.

43 On their outbound journey Hong Kong people will take anything from old clothes to expensive food stuffs to their relatives in the Mainland. On the return journey they bring back vegetables and
labour and many Hong Kong owned factories have relocated to China encouraged by
economic incentives and to maintain international competitiveness. With the shift from
local manufacturing Hong Kong businesses have prospered because of the proximity of
China. Indeed without China, it is doubtful if Hong Kong could not have sustained its
economic growth.

It may seem strange to look for authenticity and rootedness in a place where even the
natural processes of decay are speeded up by the demand for space. As Abbas notes:

Property speculation means that every building in Hong Kong, however
monumental, is potentially a ruin, premised on the logistics of here today,
gone tomorrow; a logistics that, by contracting time, dispenses with the
pathos of decay. The political slogans of the day - "prosperity and
stability." "Fifty years without change" - are thus belied by an urban
landscape that mutates right under our noses, making the city subtly
unrecognisable.4

In Hong Kong a building is considered to be old if it is more than ten years old and very
old if more than thirty years old. Whole districts have been re-developed transformed,
created or demolished in the on-going urban renewal. Lynch suggests the imageability of
a "city" evokes, and is retained as a vivid mental image in the observer. Hong Kong is
conceived of as a high density urban space while public housing estates are virtually self-
contained towns.

The Choi Hung estate when completed in mid 1964 will house 43,300
people in 7,500 flats at a total cost of just over $50 million. The cost
includes provision for 36 shops, 2 banks, a post office, 4 kindergartens,
party-rooms and playgrounds..... Five multi-storey Government aided
schools are being provided within the estate with separate funds and the
total area inside the estate boundaries is just under 27 acres.5

homegrown or bought foodstuffs. One friend's mother was so generous with her gifts that her
relatives in China assumed everything in Hong Kong must be free.

Acknowledgments to the Hong Kong Architecture and the City, Public
Culture, 6, 441-459, 1994. Abbas reminds us "It will be a nice city - once it's finished" - a long
standing joke, usually quoted to newcomers and tourists.

This leads to the definition of what might be called imageability: that quality in a
physical object which gives it a high probability of evoking a strong image in any
given observer. It is that shape, color, or arrangement which facilitates the making
of vividly identified, powerfully structured, highly useful mental images of the
environment. It might also be called legibility, or perhaps visibility in a heightened
sense, where objects are not only able to be seen but are presented sharply and
intensely to the senses.

HKHA Annual Report 1963-64, p. 2 See also p.1 Sir Robert Black's speech at the official opening of
Choi Hung Estate.
But in the vast scale of the individual projects - housing estates here are medium towns in their own right, being home to 30,000 to 40,000 people in planned densities of 2,600 persons /ha. 46

Given the scale of the housing projects in Hong Kong and the range of professions involved (developers, planners, architects & administrators) it is convenient to talk of space in terms of quantities of housing and to forget that these are individually occupied homes. 47 At a major conference held recently in Hong Kong there were representatives from architecture, planning, engineering, housing management, building and surveying. In this major conference on housing there was nothing about the quality of spatial representation inside the home or the experience of dwelling from the user's view.

The Hong Kong home is often compared to a box within a filing cabinet or a chicken coop. Each high rise block is organised into a cluster where the locale has been designed for the immediate social and spatial needs of residents. These include study rooms, leisure facilities, kindergartens, shops, cafes and markets. Many of these spaces are used to supplement the lack of domestic space and as an extension to the home.

Questioning Designed Space

The problem of attempting to trace homes through the history of architecture is that it is invariably represented as the best of architectural building. Traditionally, only classical spaces have been worthy of attention, theory, critique and appraisal. This leaves an incomplete picture of the built environment that ignores everyday spaces and more common forms of spatial design. Students of design have focused on the exceptional designers and examples of their work to learn about the constituents of good design.

Our concern must be for the warm human values that a project such as this involves. The significance for us is the creation of happy homes and environment for healthy children.

46 Derek Meesling, “Home For 2.5 million people” Building Journal of Hong Kong China, February 1991, pp. 92-97, p. 96

I believe the first aspect to impact upon the observer of our work is its very scale. Not in overall programme terms, although the numbers are enormous - 45,000 flats built every year, 130,000 people housed every year and US$2.5 million spent in the construction industry every day of the year.

47 The “Housing for Millions” Conference (May 1996) hosted by the HKHA co-hosted by the Hong Kong Institute of Architects/Engineers/Housing/Planners/Surveyors looked at housing in terms of management, technology, maintenance, policy, administration and planning. Design was discussed, from an architectural view, in terms of building fabrication and the use of internal floor area within the home. There was only one reference to the qualities that make a space a home. The discourse failed to acknowledge design and housing from the ‘users’ point of view.
Bruno Zevi recognised that a building can stand alone as a plastic form but it is the interior space that is the basis for our judgement of a building.

The most exact definition of architecture that can be given today is that which takes into account interior space. Beautiful architecture would then be architecture in which the interior space attracts us, elevates us and dominates us spiritually, ... ugly architecture would be that in which the interior space disgusts and repels us ...49

Zevi does not consider there might be anything in between, such as a space where we might feel diffidence, or a space where we might be comfortable but neither elevated or repelled. He claims the complete spatial experience comes from being inside and moving about in the building49 but in this he is referring to free-standing spaces such as classical churches, where the exterior volume directly reflects the quality and form of the interior space. This theory does not apply to buildings divided into smaller spaces where the interior quality of space may bear little relation to the overall plastic form. Architectural theoreticians who discuss architecture as if all architecture were masterworks ignore the reality of the built environment. This attitude perpetuates architectural design myths and marginalises the significance of everyday spaces.

Johnson holds the view that any "Grand Theory" of architectural rhetoric is misguided.

Lurking beneath almost any writing or pronouncements on architecture, especially those aspiring to theory, is frequently a quest for some overarching construct of the world that will guide and be reflected in architecture... Once formulated, the Grand theory will align architects with inexorable universal forces and make them fit to govern their newly founded world by design, as Platonic philosopher-kings.50

If theory is viewed as an argument, rather than a discipline specific doctrine, then counter arguments offer the possibility of expanding knowledge rather than re-deploying it as a standard reference and method of interpreting all types of space. Johnson questions the need to have an architectural position, which he feels limits ideas and perpetuates tested ways of interpreting space.

50 Ibid., p 59-60

Whenever a complete experience of space is to be realized, we must be included, we must feel ourselves part and measure of the architectural organism, be it an Early Christian basilica, Brunelleschi's Santo Spirito, a colonnade by Bernini or the storied stones of a medieval street.


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In other words, an architectural position is not one to be taken in relation to nonarchitectural matters but that concerns other architectural positions already assumed to be in position. “what is our position?” is a theoretical question; it seeks to place you in a field or space whose vectors are as yet undeclared coordinates of speculation about architecture defining some continuous realm.\(^5\)

Johnson suggests that theorising can be demystified if the ideas and concepts are presented considered as “design-talk”. If theory\(^6\) is simply a specific knowledge and way of talking about or interpreting space then it must also be seen to encompass other experience and knowledge.

Giuliani et al\(^5\) attempt to trace patterns cross-cultural space appropriation by reducing everything to an incomprehensible coding system based on a pattern of variables. Similarly, Hillier and Hanson\(^4\) propose to show how architectural order in space “originates in social life” yet their highly esoteric approach to the social logic of space only works by ignoring the physical and mental experience of the space.

Rapoport questions the whole idea of basic needs in dwelling. Shelter might be an obvious need across all cultures but there are clear differences in what is considered to be desirable, comfortable and what normal practice\(^5\). This, of course, has implications for the way design is interpreted and perceived by the residents. He describes the process of design thus:

All design, considered in this broader way as any change in the physical environment, can be understood as a process of elimination or choice from among a set of alternatives.... Both the generation and elimination of alternatives is based on the application of certain criteria which may be explicit but are more commonly implicit and unstated. As a result, many alternatives are never considered, being, as it were, eliminated though major cultural constraints; they never form part of the initial set.\(^6\)

\(^{5}\) Ibid., p.29
\(^{6}\) Ibid., pp. 33-34

Theory’s role in the practice of architecture has been thought to guide practice, but its effect has actually been to mediate the day-to-day decisions of practice through discourse, either in the broad level of architectural media or the intimate level of the special dialogue that occurs between designer and artifact. It mediates the practice of architecture by intervening between a proposal or concept and the history of all previous proposals and concepts, whether fictional, unbuilt, or built.

\(^{5}\) Bill Hillier & Julienne Hanson, The Social Logic of Space, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984

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Rapoport sees style as "habitual choice" where a choice model eliminates alternatives towards some common sense of an "ideal". He draws attention to the cultural significance within types of spatial organisation to show how this affects spatial behaviour, construction and perception. While Rapoport draws examples from many ethnic and traditional cultures he does not show how this applies within a contemporary dwelling.

Knowledge of Domestic Space

Interior design, as a discipline, has been slow to make a contribution towards a knowledge of space. If interior design is to position itself as an academic discipline, not just a professional practice, it must draw from theoretical models within other disciplines towards the development of a distinct research identity.

Most research conducted on the contemporary home has been based on Western dwellings and lifestyles. The British perspective, in particular, looms large as the social and physical setting in which most of the studies in this area has been conducted. In Britain, the home has become an important focus of cultural study. The British obsession with do-it-yourself, home maintenance and decorating has no equivalent in Hong Kong. Children in Hong Kong do not make go-carts or build tree houses, their practical hands-on experience is limited by the lack of space and DIY culture. This study, based on Hong Kong lifestyle in high density domestic space, should help to provide a useful contrast to Western design research.

Home

The concept of "home" has been analysed, dissected and interpreted by many authors. Hayward discusses home in terms of a physical structure, as territory, as a locus in space, as self and self-identity and as a social and cultural unit. The identity and symbolic

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58 D. Geoffrey Hayward, "Home as an Environmental and Psychological Concept", Landscape, vol. 20 (1) pp. 2-9, 1977
attributes of the home are further discussed by Appleyard. Porteous describes home as a territorial core while Altman & Chemers focus on the home as a “window” in order to ask what this reveals about culture/environment relations.

Environmental psychology appears to offer a useful connection between the perception and construction of space however, it offers probably the least applicable material for this kind of qualitative study. Authors have attempted to define the meaning of home atmosphere at home and home as an environmental and psychological concept but psychological studies on their own are too removed from the experience of home as a specific place. For example, Maslow and Mintz study the effects of ‘beautiful and ugly” environments specifically the effects of aesthetic surroundings on energy levels. Their conclusion: that aesthetic surroundings gave a better sense of well-being. Clearly there is need for a more focused post-occupancy study that can, more usefully, situate the home from the user’s view. Here, the phenomenological experience and multi-disciplinary nature of design clearly overlaps with other research areas yet, so far, has received little attention as a legitimate research discipline. It is appropriate therefore to determine not only where and how the knowledge that is implicit within interior design can be articulated but in what way it can make a contribution to research.

Interior Design

Interior design emerged as a distinct profession from architecture in the 1960’s. In Hong Kong the first degree course specialism was not offered until 1989. To date, interior design has relied heavily on architectural design theories and sources which has effectively prevented the development of specific research topics from an interior design perspective. Publications within interior design reflect practical concerns in the form of a manual,
rather than design as an area of research. *Housing the Family,* for example, was meant to aid designers by focusing on quantitative concerns of ergonomic space within the home. Many of these assumptions, however, supposedly based on a "typical" family clearly reflect out-dated and superficial attitudes of the 1960's and a white male majority view. The Parker Morris Report of 1961 introduced a range of standards that were used extensively in building practice in the design of post-war housing. Subsequent standards were based on these design guidelines and, it can be argued, that British domestic sensibilities and expectations for designed space can be traced to this work. In Hong Kong, HKHA design guidelines operated to a quite different brief and in a very different spatial context. Design standards used by the HKHA were, however, a major determinant of spatial sensibilities and expectations across the private and public sector affecting what was a highly urbanised population.

Edwards demonstrates how little idea architects really have of post-occupancy space. He proves that they are likely to respond to space in similar spatial terms whereas the residents' had a wider range of spatial interpretation. Darke further explores architects' assumptions. She reveals that architects' visions of the household as a "happy family" is idealistic and imprecise and that architects tend to rely heavily on their own experience, and knowledge, as a basis for designing for others.

Within design history, Rybczynski discusses the development of the home through the ages. And, while Forty & Moss refer to the pseudo-vernacular styles of suburbia this is only viewed from the exterior, the interior is not discussed. In Britain, suburbia is a

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"Design Bulletins, *Housing the Family,* Lancaster: MTP Construction, 1974


J. Darke, (3 papers) "Architects and User Requirements in Public-Sector Housing: (1) Architects' Assumptions about the Users" pp. 389-404, (2) "The Sources for Architects' Assumptions" pp. 405-416, (3) "Towards an Adequate Understanding of User Requirements in Housing" pp. 417-433, *Environment and Planning B: Planning and Design,* vol. 11, no. 4, 1984


dominant housing development and has attracted much attention as localised history. Oliver et al. consider the meanings and symbolism developed within a suburban style in UK and how this became firmly established within suburbia. In describing the rooms, details and fittings of ordinary domestic interior spaces they treat the ordinary homes as a serious subject of design. Interest in suburbia as a evolutionary and symbolic style has created a demand for knowledge of traditional details and style. In Hong Kong interest in home decorating has not yet grown to this extent and, it is true to say that most homes are relatively newly built with little by way of architectural detail or period style.

*Household Choices* was one of the first major exhibitions to present a range of everyday domestic spaces in terms of a contemporary lifestyle. The variety of writing on this project shows a much wider range of interpretation concentrating on domestic spaces as a lived-in space this was followed some years later by the television programme *A Sign of The Times* which looked exclusively on the expression of style and taste in the home. In Britain the home has become a focus of media reflecting sustained interest from a wide ranging (non-academic) audience. As a medium television and film is much more a direct method of expressing the home within a narrative that allows for a less didactic and prescriptive interpretation and has the advantage of showing residents in the setting of their own home.

With the emphasis on historical change, the television series, *The Name Of The Room* traced British domestic space from the stately home to the emergence, in the 1970's, of the do-it-yourself “knockers through”. The UK home has today become a major focus of leisure and consumption. But, as Pawley points out, until the 1960's there was no such

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77 TV Programme and publication.
In 1986 more than one million homeowners extended their homes upwards, downwards or sideways, spending an average of £4000 per household. Nearly half of them installed new kitchens, a fifth put on a porch and another fifth added a new bathroom or lavatory.
thing as a DIY industry\textsuperscript{6}. The concept of home improvements is a relatively recent phenomenon, which parallels the rise in homeownership whereas, as tenants, people were not accustomed to carrying out their own building and decorating work. In Hong Kong, the introduction of the Homeownership Scheme, and the improved design of the newer housing estates home decoration has become a growth industry though it is unlikely to follow the British model\textsuperscript{8}.

It is striking how little use is made of photography in spatial research. Photography describes space in ways that might otherwise be difficult to verbalise. It also can capture details, mood and the relationship between residents' and space. On its own it describes an environment more readily than a plan or text. The directness of photography provides a reflexive discourse in spatial interpretation which keeps research communicative and accessible. Text can be persuasive but, if used on its own, it omits the communicable knowledge that is implicit in the physically represented space. Used together with a visual image it communicates much more, more easily.

The issue of housing and homes tends to be treated quite separately. Homes might be about details: aesthetics, decoration, self-expression and identity. Housing is concerned more with urban planning, power and social development. Ash\textsuperscript{4} discusses the problems and perception of high rise housing from the British perspective, but, even in the more detailed studies, such as Glendinning and Muthesius\textsuperscript{9} study of high rise housing oddly there is little reference to the interior space. They comprehensively describe the social context and development of this dwelling form but reveal nothing about these homes as a post-occupancy space.

It is generally acknowledged that organising a high density homespace is a problem but it is not normally acknowledged as a problem that has been resolved. In order to create some form of order residents must be engaged in design as a problem-solving activity. To date there have only been two studies of Hong Kong domestic space, both conducted by

\textsuperscript{6} Pawley attributes this phenomenon to the rise in the owner-occupier as a result in the fall of public sector housing and a growth in mortgage finance.
\textsuperscript{8} In Hong Kong homes are generally smaller than in the UK and almost exclusively high-rise flats. Residents often prefer to hire a professional decorator rather than invest in materials and tools. This phenomenon is not exclusive to the upper or middle class but is also fairly common within the lower income housing estates.
\textsuperscript{9} Miles Glendinning & Stefan Muthesius, TowerBlock: Modern Public Housing in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994
architects. One approach examines spatial occupancy and space utilisation by mapping the placement and configuration of furniture within the space. This method focuses only on space, dismisses qualitative data and ignores important holistic and qualitative environmental data such as decorative elements and representation of material culture. Data was collected with a view to producing specific design guidelines however, by omitting the phenomenological context it did not consider how their tenants' concerns might lie not just with making things fit but in making the space a home. This is best summed up by Bachelard who describes the problem, and difficulty, of describing something as particular as a lived-in space.

What would be the use, for instance, in giving the plan of the room that was really my room...

Identity and Consumption

Consumption must be an important aspect of the contemporary homespace. Miller's study of London council flat kitchens provides a strong theoretical and methodological base drawn from informal interviews. His aim was to detect patterns in the self-design transformation of the Council kitchen, as a blank canvas, and to account for them.

The aim was not a formal sample survey, but to consider qualitative factors difficult to express in language or to excavate from practices but which might emerge as general trends.

Miller keeps an open mind as to the diversity of each home and groups them only loosely through what he sees as the tenant/space relationship. He maintains that the ability to "transcend such oppressive conditions" relates to tenants' level of engagement or alienation with the space. One group of single white males, for example, had done little to change the state of the original kitchen provided by the council. This group of individual tenants were solitary characters, lived a quiet life and kept themselves to themselves. By contrast, in one nuclear family dominated by the male, who was heavily engaged in do-it-yourself, the level of intervention in the kitchen was "somewhat chaotic". One other group

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*Brian Yamaguchi Sullivan, "Inhabiting Public Housing in Hong Kong: Design Guidelines Based on Residents' Living Patterns in Existing Flats", paper presented at the Housing for Millions Conference, May 1996


Ibid., p.356
had made some alterations but the basic order was maintained. Miller found these people expressed disassociation with the community and environment. Their sense of alienation was reflected in their passive engagement with their home. But by far the largest group in this study were those who had made substantial changes to their kitchens. However, Miller acknowledges that the sociability of this group, and the fact that they agreed to be interviewed in the first place, may have been a factor in the overall sampling. People in this group had made considerable changes to their kitchens, introducing additional consumer goods to counteract the plainness of the original design as "intrusive signifiers of their housing status". In two cases families had installed a completely new fully fitted designed kitchen. This was marked by a lack of additional objects, to maintain the same level of neatness evoked in kitchens in advertising brochures.  

Miller's sampling included a heterogeneous population but in this study he was able to detect differences in popular taste among different ethnic groups - particularly in the use of artefacts and colour. Financial resources did not appear to be the significant factor in the way tenants appropriated the space. But as tenants, as opposed to homeowners he noted how the council was, mentally and physically felt to be an "alien presence around them".  

Within the division of labour, housekeeping duties mostly fell to the females so that the kitchen inevitably, was seen as the woman's domain. Miller noted within the black population the gender split was not so strong, men were quite comfortable discussing cooking and decoration. In general, however, females were identified as being more likely then men to engage in making some alterations but these might be more aesthetic than structural especially where there was no man around to help undertake physical labour. 

Cooper argues, in Jungian terms, for the home to be holistically regarded as a reflection of self. But what about the home not just as an family entity but as a reflection of different family members and conflicting or competing expressions of "self" within the same

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90 In these two cases Miller noted the strong family and gender relationships with the females directing and perhaps instigating the procedure but with the males physically carrying out the work.  
91 Miller makes the point that the council was a “projection by the tenants in their construction of self-images as victims or combatants”. As working class families they knew their only alternatives to this form of housing might be private rented accommodation or worse, bed and breakfast temporary housing. It is suggested that their sense of dependency on the council may have affected their ability to overcome this passive status.  
space? When asked about their most cherished possessions Csikszentmihalyi & Halton discovered that different family members within the same household have different priorities. This appears to vary over each generation and between both sexes. Putnam too questions the idea of the home as a joint project rising from a new conjugality of self-projection in social space.

Teske’s investigation into the importance of objects in the living rooms of Greek Philadelphians discovered that Greekness was strongly represented in the use of cultural artefacts and in the dominant use of blue and white - the colours of the Greek flag - as a colour scheme. This adherence to form was strongest in second generation middle class Greeks proclaiming their identification with Greece. The effect of status, and income also appears to affect the placement and visibility of particular artefacts. Laumann & House theorise on the living room as a reflection of social attributes and, interestingly, political attitudes. They attempt to trace a style of a defined group through décor and the upwardly mobile nouveau riche. Pratt also develops the idea of class and taste in décor - in suburban Vancouver. In one approach Lawrence developed a comparative cross-cultural sociological analysis of reciprocal analysis of housing dwelling and homes. He contends that activities, especially from a temporal perspective, are connected to a space and vice versa. His comparisons of Australian and English homes reveal how specific meanings and use of domestic space cannot be described by the physical space alone, but must refer to wider social and cultural factors. He also makes the point that points out that architectural and sociological surveys tend to rely on a norm of a happy family rather than using representative cases.

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94 Tim Putnam “Beyond the Modern Home; Shifting the Parameters of Residence” in Jon Bird et al (eds.) op. cit.,
95 Robert Thomas Teske. “Living-room Furnishings, Ethnic Identity & Acculturation Among Greeks New York Folklore 5, vol 5, pp. 21-31, 1979,
98 Roderick J. Lawrence, Housing Dwelling and Homes: Design Theory, Research and Practice, Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 1987
99 R. Lawrence, Housing and Homes: Agenda for Future Research, in Marjorie Bulos & Necdet Teymur (eds.) Housing: Design, Research, Education. Aldershot: Avebury, 1993
Shing-wa says she “dreams” of having a 10-foot by 8-foot room all by herself, where she can put her things neatly together, without risk of being “messed up” by her nieces and nephews, with whom she lives. Now she only has a bed where she sleep. She can’t have a minute of quiet at home.¹⁰⁰

For Shing-wa, in her ideal home, it is the simple everyday things that matter most: a room that she can keep tidy; a place where she can have some privacy. Spatial qualities that some might take-for-granted are the essential qualities that others’ long for. By virtue of the people who live there domestic space is continually represented by everyday life, by real lives. Gullestad’s study¹⁰¹, for example shows how much working class women’s lives in Norway are centred around the home; in what she describes as a kitchen-table society. For these families home-decorating is an on-going concern. The motivation to transform the space is uppermost on their mind. “Last year we did the bathroom. This year we will panel the hall.” Couples plan ahead to the next project by keeping up to date with the latest advertisements and brochures. It is a joint effort and a shared interest: she makes the aesthetic decisions and purchases, and he puts it together. But, as Gullestad notes, for the most part, it is the housewife who marks her own particular relationship with the home through its maintenance and order. It is these repetitive daily chores and tasks that are largely done by the woman alone.

The position of women and the sexual division of labour in the home has been widely explored within feminist literature.¹⁰² Hunt¹⁰³ examines differences in the gender experience of the home and looks closely at the reasons why the housewife appears to develop a closer relationship with the home than other family members. Class and gender are often viewed together in relation to aestheticisation practices in the home. Spain’s¹⁰⁴ research investigating gendered divisions of space blurs the edges of disciplines such as geography, architecture and sociology. Pollock¹⁰⁵ discusses women’s limited spatial experience in Imperial China. In this patriarchal society wealth was measured by the size

¹⁰⁰ Janet Salaff, op. cit., p. 110
¹⁰¹ Marianne Gullestad., Kitchen-Table Society: A Study of the Family Life and Friendships of Young Working-class Mothers in Urban Norway, Oslo: Universitetsforlaget. 1984
of women's quarters and the number of wives and concubines. These beautiful chambers evoked so exquisitely in painting, books and now film, meant "containment, exclusion, and isolation for women of that society." Given women's lowly status and strict separation from male society they were made to feel invisible, and, "on the inside looking out".

In Hong Kong contemporary gender issues associated with women's work in the home have been explored by Ng and Lee. They do not, however, show how this role relates to the space. Salaff's account provides an altogether more insightful sociological study of young working women and their relationship with their home, implicit in their personal narrative.

She said, "I could leave home, but that means money to rent a room. I'd have to cook, to clean and I'd live all by myself and would be very lonely when I return home after work. I've become used to having people to talk to. It would be very troublesome, and it would be going against the family, too, so I don't think it's the solution." 108

Here, the desire to have more space and independence is weighed by the very real concerns of loneliness and the amount of effort required to maintain the space.

Home management and home making are linked to consumption which in turn can be further viewed through gender. Partington for example, claims that the production of design knowledge has bound notions of taste to "needs" which in turn become thought of as "natural requirements".

In articles on "homemaking" in women's magazines during the '50's housewives are addressed as "designers" "with a responsibility towards domestic space, inseparable from their moral duty they have to nurture and protect their family."

But "women's work" often extends beyond the day to day maintenance to the construction and aestheticisation of the home. Other authors have looked at the ideals depicted in home

108 Ng Chun-hung, "Bringing Women Back In: Family Change in Hong Kong" in Veronica Pearson & Benjamin P.K. Leung (eds.) Women in Hong Kong, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1995
106 Ibid., p. 218
106 Ibid., p. 10
design through the media and linked this to the perception of status and role within the family. Schwarz Cowan examines the truth about labour saving technology in the home. Forty, also examines the effects of household appliances in the domestic sphere while Hayden traces and highlights women's contribution to the development of design in the American home.

The particular relationship within the family unit and household structures must be appropriate to any study of home. Wallman focuses on the home as a household: a socio-spatial system centred on relationships, gender relations. Of the many sociological studies of the family conducted in Hong Kong there are few that directly connect the family to their homespace. From Rosen's study of middle class families living in Mei Foo Sun Chuen we find that the nuclear family is more common than the Chinese tradition of an extended family living together. This is supported by Lui who also explores the trend of home ownership amidst booming property prices in Hong Kong. Mitchell examines kinship patterns within high density housing while Lau Siu-kai presents a, controversial view of utilitarianistic familism among the Hong Kong Chinese where, he claims, "the individual Chinese will place his familial interests above the interests of society".

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2. Ruth Schwarz Cowan, More Work For Mother; The Ironies of Household Technology form the Open Hearth to the Microwave, New York Basic Books, 1983
3. See also Gillian Darley "The Power House" in The Name of The Room, op. cit.,
8. Tim Richardson, North Point, Hong Kong: A Case Study of High Density, (unpublished report) 1977
Wan attempts to quantify the Hong Kong quality of life and identifies the dwelling as the “area” most people would like to improve. Political uncertainty, however, raises the question in many people’s minds whether to stay in Hong Kong or leave. Salaff & Wong’s investigation gives a thorough account of residents’ emigration from Hong Kong.

Gans’ study of Italian-Americans in Boston and suburban Levittown on Crestwood heights show that people can be linked not just to a particular domestic space but also to an urban setting and community through the process of dwelling. Rainwater’s research on the infamous Pruitt Igoe describes class and racial attitudes towards the home from a marginalised section of the community. Hassan’s account of low income families in Singapore explores significant issues associated with relocation and neighbourhood interaction high density housing.

The problem with research about an experience is that people do not, or cannot always deliver useful or relevant information that be turned into conclusive research data. Andrews confirms Mass Observation’s view that even within the same environmental conditions people have different opinions about their homespace. The family relationship, age, gender, education and cultural background must affect how people interpret their home. That being the case, there can be no conclusive response about home experience. In a qualitative study the experience cannot be the same for everyone. Indeed, even the way the individual feels about their home may change according to their mood, age or even the time of the day. Diversity of insight, therefore, must be seen as a virtue of

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124 Janet Salaff & Siu-lun Wong, “Exiting Hong Kong: Social Class experiences and the Adjustment to 1997” also Eric Fong, Janet Salaff & Siu-lun Wong “Kin Networks and the Plan to leave Hong Kong”, in Ronald Skeldon (ed.) *Emigration from Hong Kong: Tendencies and Impacts*, Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1993

"It’s just like being in heaven; I sleep beautiful it’s so quiet."
"...nothing will make this place right, You walk home at night it’s like walking into an Institution"

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this form of research - even where this seems to lead to competing or contradictory statements.

As design knowledge is not likely to uppermost in residents' minds - as it is for the researcher - residents would not be expected to articulate spatial concepts in terms of theory and frameworks. Indeed, it must be recognised that residents' response may be influenced as much by the situation and context than by the question itself. In everyday life, design, as the organisation of space, as a taken-for-granted concept, may be expressed by residents' in ways that might appear to have only a superficial bearing on design. And, again, this means of expression may only be interpreted in this context as design knowledge because the researcher is looking for design knowledge. Designers have an insight into spaces and an ability to read space that reflects their professional and practical knowledge.

When designers look at the environment in the inferential mode, they do not see impersonal spaces but setting for behavior....We are, therefore, sensitive not only to how the environment looks, but also to how it got to look that way.133

Brower maintains that designers tend to take an "artistic view of the physical world". They do not see the world in the same way as everyone else and will automatically use their knowledge of form and space (in Brower's terms: responsive, operational and inferential knowledge) to interpret an environment.

Perception, then, is a creative not a mechanical act: we see what we look for and we look for things that interest us. Our perceptions are not mirror-images but interpretations of what is "out there", and it is these interpretations of the environment rather than its objective qualities that explain our attitudes and behaviors. If our information and interests change, we see the same environment somewhat differently.134

However, Brower135 also cites examples of designers' fallibility. When they did not refer to local knowledge in their interpretation of space it resulted in a housing form where no-one wanted to live.

134 ibid., p 18
135 ibid., p. 51 Brower refers to Le Corbusier's workers' houses in Pessac which were designed as simple forms, but to the residents they looked like Moroccan houses which carried a social stigma. He also cites Hassan Fathy, who designed inexpensive and efficient homes made from a mud-brick construction. The residents, however, wanted Western-style pre-fabricated homes "which they saw as progressive, but which Fathy saw as inappropriate and ugly."
In the context of everyday space and everyday knowledge that is part of that space it is difficult to say exactly what constitutes data. It may be difficult for the resident to articulate something they take for granted and experience as part of their daily life. Although residents may feel the full range of their spatial experiences they may not feel it is worth talking about (and for the researcher it is may not be particularly interesting if they do). A quantitative research method is clearly too rigid a framework through which to respond to non-quantifiable experiences. A qualitative approach provides a more appropriate method to explore non-verbal phenomenon that is sensed, but which cannot be proved. It provides the openness to capture indeterminacies and value conflicts between residents and the space as sensed by a cultural outsider.  

As an outsider, there is a danger of forcing people to give a conscious response to trivial phenomenon which may have no conscious reason. To residents the home represents something that is familiar and comfortable. It might not be clear in their own mind what they “think” about their home. They take their home for granted and might only begin to be aware of it when something is moved or changed. As Mass Observation observed:

To a great many people... the idea that they might either like or dislike their home is a novel one. They take their home for granted, and they just live there with little further thought. It is a closely interwoven part of their background, and they would normally as soon think of analysing their own motives in going to a pub or clipping a troublesome child on the ear, as of sitting down and thinking out whether and why they were or not satisfied with their homes.  

It is likely that some residents may not have much to say on their homes - because it does not occur to them to think about it. The home is such a taken for granted space diffidence may more accurately reflect the majority view. The Mass Observation study, conducted in UK during the war, identified something they called a “negative satisfaction”- something between positive satisfaction, love, dislike and dissatisfaction. They found that most people had difficulty thinking objectively about their homes, however, those who had a negative response were able to give clear reasons as to why they disliked their homes. Negative experience was based on nagging inconveniences, whereas positive comments were based on a “lack of specific inconveniences” - or having nothing especially to complain about. They cite an example of one women who claimed she had

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136 Sidney Brower, op. cit., p 18 cites Herbert Gans’ experience of the West End and how he developed a “selective perception” as he became more used to the place.


138 Positive satisfaction they claim, “is a feeling that you really like your house” while negative satisfaction is “...the feeling that there is nothing really very bad about your home and it will serve your purpose”, p 63

139 Mass Observation op. cit., p 68.
“never thought of disliking the place where she lived”. It was noted that people were able to endure appalling housing conditions if they felt they had no choice. If we apply this to the Hong Kong context, for example, these choices might be even more clear: the alternative to public housing for low income families is likely to be a smaller, more expensive private space.

The Mass Observation study highlighted many issues relating not only to housing but daily life and dwelling. It concludes that there can be no definite conclusion to a study of this nature where people’s perceptions can be diverse and even contradictory. They summed up the impossibility of the task thus:

If we do not seem to have come to any definite conclusion on any particular point, it is just that often there is no one conclusion or solution to a particular opinion problem. As the report clearly shows, the range of opinion and behaviour, even on simple domestic matters, is very wide. Not only class, age, and family, but temperament, upbringing and experience affect housing attitudes, prejudices and preferences. ...It is not our job here to solve these human problems of preference and prejudice, but rather to indicate their extent, depth, volume.\footnote{E. S. Brierley, "Design Theory in the Context of the Recent History of Housing Research" in Marjorie Bulos & Necdet Teymur (eds.) op. cit., p. 46 Brierly argues that designers found descriptive notes about lifestyles from an open-ended discussion to be more stimulating than quantitative data. He suggests, an “inductive understanding” is preferred by designers to “deductive statements”.

Regardless of the fact that there is no conclusion, one of the enduring appeals of the Mass Observation project to a designer is its readability and insight.\footnote{Mass Observation op., cit., p. 149-50} When one interviewer expresses his bewilderment at the apparently illogical ways in which some people deliberately choose to arrange their home it reveals as much about the interviewer’s own values as it does the residents.\footnote{Mass Observation, op., cit., p. 4} Mrs. C. is not a very intelligent woman, but quite good humoured and willing to answer any question she is able to. The house looks nicely kept, though in a rather muddled way. For instance, a big chair is placed just in front of the most used cupboard, so that it has to be moved every time the cupboard is opened, and all the crockery is kept standing one on top of the other on one shelf. Instead of any use being made of the other shelves, or of the hooks for hanging cups with which the dresser is equipped. Mrs. C.’s lack of logic in space planning might indicate a lack of common sense or perhaps it is something that makes sense to her.
The use of direct quotes in Parker's\textsuperscript{14}'s study of life in a British Housing estate also communicates data in the form of a more interesting, and insightful narrative.

The first week when we moved in I simply couldn't get used to the size of it, it just seemed absolutely huge. We'd hardly any furniture, and I used to walk about from one room to another and stand in the middle of the floor looking at how big they were.....What we've got is first this big sitting room with the floor-to-ceiling windows opening out onto the balcony: then through that door there's the big kitchen, then that door there leads out into the hall....The hall's wide that's one of the best things in the flat; it gives you the feeling of airiness and space as soon as you come in\textsuperscript{14}.

Interpretation is a complex matter. As cross-cultural research, the emic and etic position needs to be made clear. Who said what, when, where to whom, and why? In this case useful data, may not be what respondents say but rather what they do not say. Altman and Gauvain\textsuperscript{14} refer to four types of research: descriptive, diagnostic, theoretical and applied research. It should be possible to make these implicit within a holistic and reflexive interpretation: description as a catalogue of spatial quality; diagnostic questions that pertain to the specific context; insight from the specifics applied to the theory of the wider context and the questions that lead to further understanding and knowledge about design application and spatial interpretation.

The Narrative

The problem of representing spatial sensibilities corresponds with similar methodological issues for example, within human and cultural geography. Interpretative geography has been concerned with the understanding and analysis of meanings in specific contexts recognising the spatial world as a convergence of the social world. In this respect geography has already re-invented itself, moving away from social sciences towards a humanities base.\textsuperscript{15} And, by introducing literary, humanistic and philosophical methods to the subject it has successfully diversified towards a convergence with other disciplines.

\textsuperscript{14} Tony Parker, \textit{The People of Providence: a Housing Estate and Some of its Inhabitants}. London: Hutchinson, 1983

\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Ibid.}, p.21:2


\textsuperscript{15} Peter Jackson, \textit{Maps of Meaning: An Introduction to Cultural Geography}, London: Routledge, 1992

Jackson explains how geographers were concerned about the treatment of human agency and sought to allow a "more sympathetic treatment of human individuality , subjectivity and
I could continue almost endlessly recalling other individual details which give this kind of domestic life a recognizable quality of its own; the steam-and-soda-and-hashed-meat smell of wash-day, or the smell of clothes drying by the fireside; the Sunday smell of the News of the World-mingled-with-roast-beef; the intermittent reading of pieces of old newspaper in the lavatory; the waste of Sunday afternoon, relieved by occasional visits to relatives or to the cemetery, whose gates are flanked by the stalls of flower-sellers and by the workshops of those who sell expensive headstones. Like any life with a firm centre, it has a powerful hold: working-class people themselves are often sentimental about it.  

Hoggart's narrative shows how working class attitudes were reinforced through popular culture; media, conversation and community. These everyday phenomena are the shared sensibilities of an imagined community: reading the same newspapers, sharing the same diet and political affiliations. Hoggart acknowledges that for all his cultural insideness, he is writing from memory, where there is a danger of emotional involvement romanticising the old ways over the new. He admits he is attempting to generalise attitudes of a working class life that fits with a majority, or rather as he saw the majority from within his own social and religious group.

As a cultural outsider, I have no access to this shared local language of spatial memory and experience of dwelling. As an enquiry into design knowledge the research itself should be self-reflexive. As Geertz points out: "... a good interpretation of anything... should take us to the heart of that which is the interpretation." The issue here is not what I am looking at, but rather at what I am looking.

If anthropological interpretation is constructing a reading of what happens, then to divorce it from what happens - from what, in this time or that place, specific people say, what they do, what is done to them, from the whole vast business of the world - is to divorce it from its applications and render it vacant.

...
Geertz acknowledges that often anthropologist's fascination for the exotic and marginalised aspects of the human race can be ascribed to a "device for displacing the dulling sense of familiarity..." It is the quality of familiarity that prevents us from seeing what is obvious and everyday.

Looking at the ordinary in places where it takes unaccustomed forms brings out not, as has often been claimed, the arbitrariness of human behavior...but the degree to which its meaning varies according to the pattern of life by which it is informed. Understanding a people's culture exposes their normalness without reducing their particularity...It renders them accessible: setting them in the frame of their own banalities, it dissolves their opacity. 152

Geertz, explains, it is as much about "guessing at meanings, assessing the guesses, and drawing explanatory conclusions from the better guesses...". 153 As a cross-cultural encounter my interpretation is bound to reveal a personal cultural bias and knowledge of space. Many of the questions that I have about the Hong Kong home are bound to arise from what I cannot see, or would have expected to see. There may be other questions based on what the residents do, and do not, articulate about the everyday experience of their homespace. The aim of this interpretation, as thick description, Geertz describes thus:

The aim is to draw large conclusions from small, but very densely textured facts; to support broad assertions about the role of culture in the construction of collective life by engaging them exactly with complex specifics.154

This study does not set out to be a comprehensive or definitive description of the Hong Kong home but it aims to further develop knowledge of spatial representation in a particular spatial context. The questions about spatial representation that arise in this specific context would be expected to be different from other places. If there are any conclusions to be drawn they must refer to a wide, and seemingly dense range of experiences.

Glassie's *Passing the time in Ballymenone* 155 is a fine example of research that seems closer to a literary work than an anthropological cultural inventory. Glassie captures the everyday detail as well as an overall sense of the place, time, rhythm and space and holistic relationship between these people and their homes. He conveys a respect for each home as a private domestic space rather than just a setting for study. By virtue of being a

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152 Ibid., p. 14
153 Ibid., p. 20
154 Ibid., p. 28
cultural outsider he is able to draw attention to details within the space that a cultural insider might not ordinarily notice. Above all in this study he draws out the significance of spatial order and representation of the lived-in space.

Order does not come from codified programs but from people who effect conceptual continuity out of time's continuity at centers under their control - the hearth for example, where perpetual fire joins cleaning to cooking to talking to social stability to life, to all. From, through, centers of human control, infinity expands.\textsuperscript{136}

Long\textsuperscript{127} states that design research is about bringing a living knowledge to life. In my study of Hong Kong housing, it is largely about articulating a knowledge that Hong Kong people take for granted. It is about stating the obvious. But design knowledge needs to be examined more closely. While new residents may be more open to discussing their decorating choices as an easily articulated experience of design knowledge, this knowledge, as an acquired knowledge, lacks a deeper sense of that space. Long-term residents whose knowledge of the space is blurred as a familiar part of everyday life through the experience of different spatial problems through the life cycle is much more difficult to access, but it also presents a more challenging context to explore and question knowledge of design.

For example, when people express diffidence about a space, or when they have difficulty answering probing questions it is likely that what they are expressing is not a lack of knowledge \textit{per se}, but simply because they see the subject in straightforward terms; they perceive that knowledge as common sense.

If common sense is as much an interpretation of the immediacies of experience, a gloss on them, as are myth, painting, epistemology, or whatever, then it is like them, historically constructed, and, like them, subjected to historically defined standards of judgment. It can be questioned, disputed, affirmed, developed, formalized, contemplated, even taught, and it can vary dramatically from one people to the next. It is, in short, a cultural system, though not usually a very tightly integrated one, and it rests on the same basis that any other such system rests; the conviction by those whose possession it is of its value and validity\textsuperscript{138}.

In Geertz's terms, common sense presents not only a cultural framework of reference but

\textsuperscript{136} Ibid., p. 373
\textsuperscript{127} Fiachra Long "Research as Living Knowledge", \textit{Studies in Higher Education}, vol. 19, no. 1, 1994
\textsuperscript{138} Clifford Geertz, \textit{Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology}, New York: Basic Books, p. 76
"the hard core of general knowledge of all cultures". Diffidence towards the home may not stem from a sense of inadequacy, but rather the insider's experience in their circle, that there is no point in talking about what everyone knows is common sense. However, what is interesting here is that Geertz suggests it is possible (for an outsider) to "remind people of what they already know" and to re-present this as knowledge. In other words, it is possible for cultural insiders to re-examine and reflect on their common sense knowledge as knowledge.

Lifestyle

Viewed from the outside the mysteries of Chinese culture abound. Language, calligraphy, cuisine, ritual, tradition and arts are all recognisable features of "Chineseness" the visual elements of an ancient culture. Is there a place for the Chinese mystique in public housing? The shiny towers of downtown Central may contrast with the somewhat less glamorous towers of the housing estate, but it is often the same people who inhabit both worlds. The smart executive may eat breakfast in a Dai Pai Dong one day, and McDonalds the next. He may speak fluent English, Cantonese and Putonghua, sing along with Japanese songs at karaoke and holiday in Thailand. And, he may live in a 200 sq. feet public housing flat.

In Hong Kong, therefore, there is no unified, coherent cultural foundation to speak of, whether in the sense of a high culture, a national culture, or a traditional culture. One ventures to observe, the only socio-cultural arena that comes closest to providing an overarching cultural framework of some form is the arena of popular culture.

In the past, as Ng Chun Hung points out Hong Kong was mainly studied as a "proxy" of Chinese culture. Academic interest lay with the surviving traditional cultural practices. Studies by Baker, Anderson, and to a varying extent Ward present 1960's views of Chinese culture. Academic interest lay with the surviving traditional cultural practices. Studies by Baker, Anderson, and to a varying extent Ward present 1960's views of

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160 Dai Pai Dong is a local outdoor café located on a street corner and normally comprising folding stools and tables under a PVC canopy.

161 Chan Hoi Man "Popular Culture and Political Society: Prolegomena on Cultural Studies in Hong Kong" in Elizabeth Sinn (ed.) Culture and Society in Hong Kong, Centre of Asian Studies Occasional Papers and Monograph, no.116, Hong Kong: The University of Hong Kong, 1995, p. 23

162 Ng Chun Hung, "New Directions in Cultural Studies" in Elizabeth Sinn (ed) Culture and Society in Hong Kong, op., cit., p. 23


Hong Kong culture through Chinese practices which bore little relation to the everyday life of millions working, and living in the urban society. Later, local, academic studies began to focus more on the industrialised society but this was largely through a quantitative analysis of the social structure. These studies were mainly concerned with perceived changes within the social and ignored the everyday aspects of the contemporary popular culture and mass consumption. As Ng comments, cultural studies in Hong Kong have clearly been less adventurous than in the West.

From a post-war population who worked hard to build a new life, the new generation were affected by new influences. Women in particular were exposed through the media to views on how to create the ideal domestic life through tasteful decoration of the home and how to rear and educate children. Ng points out with the emergence in the 1970's of the Modern Domestic Ideal, the shift towards a nuclear family base is reflected, or influenced by a move towards self-contained public and private housing designs. Ng shows how a study of the Modern Domestic Ideal highlights interwoven concerns such as: class mobility and distinction, gender division of labour, family and childhood history as well as such cultural practices in leisure, ritual and consumption, related to social structure.

Miller\textsuperscript{111} sees a theory of housing as a theory of consumption where the home is created in response to changing consumption needs. He warns that consumption cannot be considered in isolation but rather as the result of an individual’s choice patterns associated with the space or class, or lifestyle, as a social construction. Featherstone’s\textsuperscript{167} exploration of “lifestyle” as a reflection of consumer culture and the individual’s “life project” describes the new petite-bourgeoisie as someone who is “constantly educating himself in the field of taste, style and lifestyle.” As perfect consumers they identify with the “intellectual’s lifestyles and acts”. They have abandoned their former habitus towards “more expressive consumption norms”. In short, social mobility brings about a new lifestyle; a new way of living where the individual’s taste and needs to be seen in a wider context in relation to their exposure to a range of goods represented as lifestyle images or commodities within their everyday life.

In \textit{Distinction}, we see how Bourdieu’s\textsuperscript{111} interpretation of his theory of habitus, reflects a particularly French attitude to taste, strongly associated with class distinction. In Hong

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item Barbara E. Ward, \textit{Through Other Eyes: Essays in Understanding Conscious Models}. Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1985
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Kong, however, there were really only two classes; rich and poor. People have tended to externalise their wealth, and their ‘taste’ more through fashionable clothing and an expensive car; things other people will see. The Hong Kong home, as a place that mainly only the family will ever get to see, was not normally regarded as a place that should/could reflect the family’s status, achievements, or indeed, wealth. But with the increase in social mobility, the introduction of better quality public housing, the move towards homeownership, and the demand for a better lifestyle, it is clear that this long-standing, taken-for-granted concept of the home is changing.
CHAPTER 4

AT HOME WITH DENSITY
Squatter Housing

In the range of housing options available today squatter housing is still officially recognised as a viable housing form alongside Homeownership flats, private duplex dwellings, luxury homes, boat dwellers, caged dwellers, and the more typical HKHA rented flat.

To the people who fled from China, after the rise in Communism, Hong Kong offered political stability and security. They expected no guarantees of work, welfare or accommodation but were eventually absorbed into the Colony as new immigrants and given equal rights with other citizens. The period after the Pacific war leading up to the development of the HKHA programme has been well documented. By the end of 1949 it estimated there were 300,000 people living in squatter homes built in hillsides, rooftops and alleyways. They comprised not only new immigrants but also former Hong Kong residents who fled the Territory over the course of the war and were either dispossessed of their homes or had become squatters by selling their property to wealthier immigrants. Squatters lived in structures built illegally on rooftops or on land designated by the Government for a different use. They were by no means regarded as social outcasts or marginal citizens; squatters were fully integrated members of Hong Kong society.

Individual squatter homes were often clustered together to form sizable villages and communities. These villages were not, as might appear, a haphazard jumble of huts, but in fact thriving communities supported by shops, trade and schools. Each village had a distinct character and social make up. Sheung Li Uk, for example, at one time supported four acres of agricultural land with flower nurseries vegetable and fruit-growing as well as pig breeding. There were also forty shops, a market, one hundred workshops and a host of

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1 *Hong Kong Housing Authority Annual Report, 1962-63,* p. 2
2 There appear to be conflicting official estimates of squatters. The Annual Report by the Commissioner for Resettlement 1955-6, p. 1 estimates the number at 300,000. Peter K. W. Fong, puts the number at 250,000 in 1950, see Peter K. W. Fong, *Housing Problems and Public Housing in Hong Kong: A Case Study of the Housing Provision in a Densely Populated Metropolitan Area,* Ph.D. thesis, New York University, 1980 p. 90. Whereas Smart cites a figure of 330,000 in 1950 up from 30,000 in 1948 see: Alan Smart, *Making Room: Squatter Clearance in Hong Kong,* Centre of Asian Studies occasional paper no. 102, Hong Kong: The University of Hong Kong, 1992, p. 44

For the whole colony, 48% were Hong Kong born as against 46% in squatter areas, 14% arrived before 1946 compared with 15% in squatter areas and 38% arrived after 1946 as against 39% in squatter areas. In resettlement estates the percentages were respectively 47, 11 and 42. This tends to substantiate...that in the years after the war considerable numbers of local-born or long-term residents themselves became squatters; and also that the later building boom dispossessed a sizeable number of old residents.
trades ranging from rattan furniture manufacture to shoe-makers, joss-stick makers, tinsmiths and blacksmiths. All this was in addition to the two to three hundred home-based industries such as embroidery, glove-making, decorative beadwork, tailoring, match-box making, and carpentry.¹

It was generally true that squatters occupied the lower socio-economic position but they were by no means all coolies living from casual work, many residents had a steady income and good job.²

Both economically and socially there are very great differences between one squatter colony and another; some consist almost solely of brothels or opium dens; some are flourishing trading centres dealing in reputable wares; some are inhabited only by Chiu Chow speaking immigrants from Swatow; some have a very high proportion of bread winners in regular, legal and well-paid employment; some consist of nothing but matting roofs two or three feet off the ground which cannot even be called shacks. Not a few Government employees from nearly all departments, school teachers, employees of big public utilities, and others who may be earning total incomes of $300 a month or more have been found amongst the squatters.³

Squatter homes varied in standard, quality and scale and often were built by speculators specifically to be rented or sold. These structures ranged from flimsy wooden shacks to substantial concrete or brick structures divided into several floors and cubicles. Property speculation on squatter huts was a profitable enterprise⁴. Ordinary families too, might subdivide their homes into bedspaces, or rent out individual rooms in the property to bring in additional income. Indeed, squatter housing had its own sophisticated system of rental and property development, which Governor Grantham cited was a justification for launching the resettlement programme.

...by this resettlement programme we are breaking a “racket”. Some people may suppose that squatters are sturdy industrialists who prefer to build their own humble homes on a hillside rather than pay exorbitant rents for a share of a tenement. Some of them are; but in fact the squatter who owns his own hut is rare; most squatters are paying exorbitant rent for the hut, or, more usually for the part of the hut which they occupy.⁶

¹Annual report for the Commissioner for Resettlement, Hong Kong: Government Printer, 1955-6 p. 7-8
²Ibid., p. 9
³Most families however had a monthly income of between $159 and $300: in a typical case the father would be an artisan in a construction company or an assistant in a shop or restaurant: his elder daughter would work in a weaving factory, while his wife added to the family earnings by doing embroidery or sewing at home.
⁴Annual Report on Hong Kong 1949, Hong Kong: Local Printing Press, p. 82
⁵Alan Smart, op., cit., p 114. Triads would “offer” to build or rebuild structures for families, rather than let them do it themselves, that way they could have a monopoly on the site.
⁶Governor Grantham, Hong Kong Hansard, March 2, 1955: 40 cited in Alan Smart op., cit., p. 41
It is difficult to generalise on squatter homes built over the past fifty years. Homes ranged from basic lean-to shacks to large stone-built bungalow dwellings built with a verandah and full indoor plumbing, telephone and electricity. Squatter homes were constructed on hillsides and rugged terrain on stilts, using whatever materials people could find: timber, concrete, metal, plywood and bituminous felt. Residents were creative in their ability to make the best use of space:

The small amount of space available for the average squatter family is used by most of them to the utmost extent. With Chinese diligence and the talent for improvisation sometimes quite interesting and often quite comfortable dwellings emerge. These squatters often create a good environment for themselves; forced by despair and necessity they use their creative ability to build dwellings which would amaze some architects or builders considering the little financial power, restricted possibilities, and the liberty of action they really have.

Interiors were dark and badly ventilated, unless the hut was high up on a hillside where residents could take advantage of good views and fresh breezes. Most dwellings were located away from the main road down narrow paths. These were often so narrow they could not be reached by fire engines, consequently, hillside dwellers lived in fear of fire: which was frequent and often fatal.

Families had to collect and store water from a standpipe, which in the late 1960's was fixed at one standpipe for 500 persons. Communal latrines were provided by the Government and bathing facilities at a ratio of one per one hundred squatters.

Otto Golger, found about half the Hong Kong squatter homes he visited in 1967 to be clean inside, despite the filthy surroundings. By contrast, Chan Ping-chiu's study a few years later, informed by his own experience as a former squatter, maintains that the interiors were always spotless. Squatter homes had either cement screed or a wooden floor with

\[\text{Ibid., pp. 30-31.}\]
\[\text{The peak year for squatting was 1964 (603,200) but this figure also included boat dwellers.}\]
\[\text{Peter K.W. Fong, op. cit., p. 102.}\]

The floor is well levelled with cement. The lower parts of the walls are constructed with concrete or other rock materials. However, as regulations prescribed, the upper parts of walls and the roof are made of wood covered with zinc plates. There is a layer of water-proof and heating insulator placed in between the wood and the zinc plate on the roof. Windows are made either of wood or of glass. Except in rare cases, houses consist of two bedrooms and a living/dining room which in some cases is used as a sleeping place at night. There is generally a cockloft, used either for sleeping or for storage. The kitchen is quite spacious, although it is not used for dining and although most of the food preparation is
household goods hung from every available space, inside and out. In Golger's survey the average floor space per hut was 73.7 sq. feet with an average net floor space per person at 17.1 sq. feet. The most extreme example of density in this survey was a 56 sq. feet hut, inhabited by 9 people. Inside, Golger found the most typical items of furniture were: bunkbeds, lockable metal chests, fans, refrigerators, radios, wardrobes and chests, tables and chairs. He noted that people kept all sorts of bits and pieces with the vague idea that they might prove useful in the future. The interior of the hut might be decorated with family photographs, calendars, knick-knacks as well as a family shrine and ancestral tablets. In the more established and later squatter sites where there was an electricity supply, residents might also have a television, radio or refrigerator.

The Canadian sociologist, Janet Salaff commented that of all the homes she visited as part of her research, carried out in the first half of the 1970's, she preferred the Chu's squatter hut, on account of the refreshing air, hillside location and range of rooms where she could retreat to rest or quietly read. The home itself was very simple.

The Chu's cottage consisted of a timber frame covered with rough-sawn wooden planks. The windows were paneled only with wire-mesh fly screens, temporarily boarded against the cold in January and February and typhoons in the summer. Father and mother slept on a Western-style double bed in a curtained off corner of the one-room cottage. An altar to Kwan-yin, Goddess of Mercy, stood upon a table, and a television set and large chest of drawers occupied a wall opposite...

Squatter residents normally made use of the space immediately outside their home. Here, they would do their laundry, prepare food, dine and cook as well as store large bulky items such as a buckets, basins and later, a washing machine. Even twenty years ago it was common for the whole family, indeed the whole village, to sleep outside in the summer nights. With many activities conducted outdoors, in Chan's experience the interior space might only used for watching TV, sleeping and for storage of personal effects.

done outside the house. A portion of the kitchen is always set aside as a bathing place, which is not separated except perhaps by a plastic curtain...

Janet W. Salaff, Working Daughters of Hong Kong: Filial Piety or Power in the Family?, New York: Columbia University Press, 1995 Salaff's enjoyment of the space appears to reflect her own cultural values of space, as a place to retreat and be quiet. It compares with the values expressed by Anderson (see chapter 2) in his study living with Chinese families in Penang, also Wolf's experience living with a family in Taiwan, Margery Wolf, The House of Lim; A Study of a Chinese Farm Family, New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1968

Chan Ping-chiu. op. cit.
The main disadvantage to living in squatter huts was the lack of facilities and threat of typhoons, termites and fire. Outdoor communal latrines were generally accepted since the majority of people at that time did not have individual indoor plumbing in their homespace. Salaff relates how the Chus would use the communal outhouses for solid waste but preferred to urinate on the cement floor in the privacy of their kitchen, which they then washed down with water which flowed down the hill. Golger concludes that people generally did not complain about the poor living conditions and were grateful for the introduction of improvements such as a proper water supply and electricity. He observed that density was not the main disadvantage to squatter living but there were daily inconveniences associated with the lack of a planned infra-structure, such as, schools, clinics and community centres as well as more basic needs such as waste disposal, drainage and electricity supply.

However, living in a squatter village had some advantages. It was cheaper, and often healthier than living in the crowded urban tenements. People lived together as a community and felt comfortable about leaving their doors and windows open which created high visibility inside and out and gave neighbours plenty of opportunity to interact and chat. Chan presents a positive picture of squatter villages as communities where everyone knew everyone else. He claims privacy was not an issue, since everyone already knew everyone else's business, which meant there was no need to pry and they could live together in a spirit of mutual reliance and co-operation. For example, parents could allow their children freedom to play outside since there was always some adult nearby who would look out for them. As a child, Chan remembers the difference between the required social behaviour of being indoors in contrast with the freedom of playing outdoors.

Except for watching TV programmes, children do not like to play inside the house. Children inside their house are expected to behave themselves in ways pleasing to adults. They must act as adults want them to act: to play quietly in a corner, or to show themselves off to other adults to demonstrate the virtues of their parents. Parents talk to them in an adult tone, which may be too tough for middle-class families. However they are given the freedom to roam up and down the street just outside the houses.

17 Chan, Ping-chiu, op. cit., p. 16 Chan points out the residents of South End did not find it inconvenient not to have an indoor toilet since the latrines were nearby. He states that "... except for newly constructed modern houses, no houses, be they squatter or not, have toilets." Clearly, he is referring here to older tenements and rural housing as a comparison but, of course, Westerners and wealthy Chinese would have had indoor toilets and people living in newer tenements would have had private toilets.

18 Golger is not clear whether he means that people did not make complaints to him, or to the authorities.

19 Chan, Ping-chiu, op. cit., p. 30
Squatter villages were made up of wooden huts, densely packed together often built in unsanitary conditions. However, it does not appear that these conditions affected the social well being of the residents. Chan claims that people were attached to the squatter village for reasons they considered to be more important than the quality of interior space: the social and environmental aspects of living as a community. Living in a low rise dwelling facilitated greater interaction between neighbours which in turn helped to generate a stronger sense of community and sense of belonging. For reasons, outlined by Golger, squatter people were happier to left in peace, without interference from the authorities. They were not averse to having a better home, and were aware that a move would have advantages, however, they felt insecure about making changes to their lifestyle such as having to adjust to a new environment and paying regular rent. In a community that was created over years amidst a background of poverty and political strife, stability might at that time have been more important to them than any problems associated with the inconvenience of density or unsanitary living conditions.

For the most part new immigrants were tolerant of the housing problem, since they believed they had a better chance in the Colony than in China. Southern Chinese traditionally have adopted an ambivalent attitude toward Government authority and a resentment of its interference. For the most part, new immigrants were well disposed to abide by Government rules. Seeking an explanation for Hong Kong's stability, Lau Siu-kai suggests that people had little contact with the colonial authorities but aware of its dominant role and as refugees they were primarily concerned with finding employment, often working seven days a week from 6am to 9pm to provide for their families.

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2Frank Leeming, *Street Studies in Hong Kong*, Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1977 p. 43. Leeming cites figures from the China State Statistical Bureau which in 1956 acknowledged residential accommodation at 3.51 sq. m per person in Canton, 2.54 in Harbin and 2.26, in Shanghai from 38 sq. ft to 24 sq. ft per person. Space and housing aside, the political and social problems in China might have offered incentive enough for them to tolerate the situation in Hong Kong.


22 Janet Salaff op. cit., p. 227 Salaff cites one example of a family where the family was forced to temporarily split up when the family breadwinner died. In this family the eldest son was placed in an orphanage, one daughter was placed with relatives and the remaining six children moved with their mother to a tenement rooftop where they constructed a dwelling from wooden planks. When this was blown away in a typhoon the family decamped to the stairwell of the building until they were eventually allocated a room in a Resettlement estate.
From Village to Estate

It is thus self-evident that land within the urban area, or at least the more accessible parts of it, must not be sterilized by cheap single-storey housing, and therefore vertical development, in the space of multi-storied blocks of flats, has been accepted as the only solution to the problem.  

The Mark I Resettlement Blocks introduced in 1954 established a new concept of high-density living which was to set a housing standard in Hong Kong. Nothing on this scale had ever been attempted in the Territory before. At the start of the housing programme local authorities with no prior experience in housing management had to recruit expertise from overseas. The buildings were built and designed by the Public Works department, managed by the Resettlement Department with amenities built and managed by the Urban Services Department. The former Hong Kong Housing Authority initially used local architects for the design of its early estates until the in-house architectural section was developed.

Initially, since there was no mechanism for treating individual family cases the most efficient, and fairest, method of allocating homes was by a ratio of 24 sq. feet floorspace per adult - less than the 35 sq. feet minimum. Once this system was in place for the Mark I blocks it set a precedent for subsequent blocks in Hong Kong. Homespace was thus conceived by the architects in terms of overall floorspace rather than through a desired spatial quality. It was a utilitarian approach to design: a simple space that would present least problems to build, would meet the approved density level and provide a regular shape for maximum efficiency of internal space.

Once the Resettlement Estates were established and occupied they represented an image of Hong Kong homespace against which all other Hong Kong dwelling forms could be compared in terms of rental value, facilities, amenities, location and interior quality. A room on a resettlement estate was relatively inexpensive, well located, secure and probably better managed than a private tenement. Certainly, the interior quality was no worse than could be found for the equivalent rent elsewhere in Hong Kong.

21 *Hong Kong Housing Authority Annual Report, 1955-57*, p. 2
24 *Hong Kong Housing Authority Annual Report 1962-63*, p. 4

Public housing management is still a comparatively new profession in Hong Kong and there are no facilities except those provided by the Authority and the Housing society for the training of housing managers. It has, therefore, been necessary to recruit from Britain trained and experienced Housing Managers in order to take charge of the investigation, letting and management of new estates, and to train the local staff in their duties. The Authority has recruited five such housing managers during the year, but the main difficulty has been in the recruitment of suitable local staff with the right qualities in order to be trained in the profession of housing management.
Residents of the Mark I blocks had the inconvenience of outdoor cooking, communal latrines and standpipes but, ironically, this lack of individual facilities made for interaction between neighbours. It was by design default, rather than by design, that residents had more opportunity to meet their neighbours.

This high visibility that was in large part a consequence of the building's design gave these residents a much higher level of information about each other. In contrast, the self-contained multi-storey estates with their dark central entrances reduced visibility and social relations. This was revealed in the likelihood that tenants knew the names and occupations of their neighbours, and also by the likelihood that they talked with and exchanged help with those living in the same building.\(^\text{23}\)

The prospect of living in a "Cement House"\(^\text{26}\) with four sturdy walls and roof gave people physical protection against typhoons, landslides and vermin and probably psychological security that they were permanent residents of Hong Kong, and would not be forced to go back to China. According to Golger's study, even in the 1970's, although people were often reluctant to move from the squatter village once they were resettled into the new estate it was perceived to be a big improvement on their previous home\(^\text{27}\).

In Golger's study of resettlement blocks, 97% tenants in the older blocks were aware the flats were too crowded but astonishingly 82% said they liked living there. The term "like" is therefore heavily weighed. It might be interpreted to mean many things: that they liked it better than where they lived before; that they liked the infra-structural facilities such as wet markets, or water supply; they liked the fact that they had somewhere to live at all, at a rent they could afford. The overall density did not detract from the feeling that living conditions were better than those they had before. And, although the homespace was crowded, as were the floor, and the whole block, residents were already predisposed to accept such a comparatively high level of density. They did not feel that being surrounded by so many people was a bad thing.\(^\text{28}\) The Commissioner for Resettlement attempted to defend the high space allocation by claiming the space was only ever densely packed at night so that the density level appeared on paper to be worse than it was in fact. (Plate 9)

\(^{22}\) Cited in Chan, Ping-chiu, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 79.
\(^{25}\) A colloquial term given to the Resettlement estate by squatter villagers.
\(^{26}\) Otto Golger. "Hong Kong: A Problem of Housing The Masses" \textit{Ekistics}, vol.32, 196, pp. 173-77, 1972 - Golger found that 40.6% of squatters interviewed did not wish to be resettled.
\(^{27}\) Otto Golger, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 40 - Although the average floor space was only 22.9 square feet per person and the lowest was 9.5 sq. feet. 97% in the older blocks considered them to be too crowded however, 82% people surveyed said they liked living in the new estate.
Fortunately the Hong Kong climate allows people to be outdoors for most of the day so that it is only at night that each room is filled to capacity.

The space allocation system might have appeared to be the fairest method of calculating eligibility for housing but as a mathematical equation of space it does not take into consideration how they might use the space. As a basic measure 24 sq. feet per person, (popularly referred to as twice the size of a coffin) must allow for furniture, general household storage and internal circulation. Young children, who only counted as half an adult would be more likely to spend more time at home than a working adult. Within a matter of years, as children grew up over crowding was inevitable.

The total floor area measures about 11,300 sq. feet and on this floor space there are 62 domestic rooms which will be occupied by about 90 families the total number of persons including children being about 340. These 340 persons must share six latrines and two stand-up pipes, the water in which may not be on for more than 2 1/2 hours a day because of the Colony’s restrictions.

Although facilities were communal they were at least nearby and shared only by families living on the same floor - rather than the whole village. The Resettlement blocks also provided residents with an ordered infra-structure including roof-top schools set up by voluntary groups. Later, provision was made for on-site clinics and the Urban Services Department built recreational areas. Residents had to adjust to living in a more disciplined setting than the squatter villages and to a new lifestyle as a model tenant.

He is asked, for example, to buy a small covered dustbin, to make himself responsible for cleaning the public verandah outside his room, and to use only kerosene for cooking. He is advised to whitewash his room, he is told what form of partitioning has been found by experience to be most convenient and healthy, and it is made clear that he must not engage in any trade of handicraft which would be a nuisance or a danger to others.

State housing was designed to operate on efficient functional lines so that the old attitudes towards hygiene would be eradicated once and for all. The State needed to ensure that

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30Ibid.,
31Ibid., p. 15.
32Otto Golger, op., cit., p. 40 Golger makes the comment that 73% people surveyed did not consider the resettlement estate surroundings to be dirty even though he, himself, considered them to be filthy. It is likely that the squatter residents would have been used to living in far worse conditions than Golger. One should also bear in mind that the sanitary standards for public housing set by the Hong Kong Government are unreasonable according to modern day Chinese and Western sensibilities. However one also needs to consider how much these standards have changed.
this form of high density living at least would not be any worse than the tenements and squatter villages they replaced and tenancy rules were strictly enforced and checked. 33

Any inconvenience associated with the physical space occupied by so many people could be weighed by a stronger appreciation of their monetary and social contribution to the household. Families were often dependent on the salaries of the elder children who would postpone their marriages until the whole family could manage without their contribution. 34

In Hong Kong the Home is not necessarily conceived of as living space within four walls. In the West, the homespace might include a garden, and garage or the street. In Hong Kong where density in the home makes the locale an important a natural extension to the family home and lifestyle. Memories of home are not confined to the interior space but to activities associated with everyday living which took people into the streets; helping in the shop, selling things door-to-door and going to the market. Leeming comments that a combination of domestic density and a predilection for social interaction were major factors in creating a highly externalised lifestyle.

Life in the cubicles is one factor which drives Hong Kong people to live in public, in the streets and in restaurants. The cost of eating on restaurants and sharing the life of the streets is equally a factor which predisposes people not to spend more on housing. 35

But, it may also be argued that traditionally, in the villages of China, where there is not the same problem of density, people have always used the exterior space for casual gatherings. Men, and the especially the elderly were used to meeting outside in open space or in a tea shop. It is likely that residents who were brought up in a village would choose to socialise with others outside of the home regardless of the domestic density.

33 Authorised persons per room were required to have an official photograph on display see Annual Report, Commissioner for Resettlement 1956-6 op., cit.,
34 Janet W. Salaff, op., cit., p. x-xi
35 Frank Leeming op., cit. p. 21.
With such a high concentration of residents it was perhaps inevitable that open spaces at ground level would become subsumed by hawker trade and their chaotically built stalls. This influx of hawkers to the estate showed a lack of foresight on behalf of the planners who did not consider how the everyday consumer needs for such a large population would be met. Street hawkers have always been a way of life in Hong Kong and long before there were any supermarkets or wet markets available on site they provided an important community service. However, as the early estates were not designed with this sort of street activity in mind the congestion led to problems with refuse disposal, fire hazards and through access and further contributed to the crowded appearance of the estates. In 1958 two hawker bazaars were established by the urban services department to accommodate and regulate hawkers.

Chan Ping-chiu argues that foreigners who make judgements on the lack of homelife and its connection to density and are not fully aware of the Hong Kong context. This may be so. Eating out is certainly very popular in Hong Kong but the home-cooked family meal is an important aspect of Chinese family life. Large family gatherings are often held in the smallest of flats and married children are encouraged to have their evening meal with the family in part because they have no time to cook for themselves and also to maintain the family contact. In the past when families were much larger than today, the number in the household could fluctuate. Immigrants filtering in from China, legally and illegally, could normally count on support from extended family members’ living in Hong Kong, no matter how densely packed they were at home. One local politician, for example, recalls his early days in Hong Kong:

Initially, I went to stay with my cousins, who had just started a small barbecued pork cooked-food stall in Central, and then I went to live with my other cousin, who was staying in Tsuen Wan. She lived with her family, in one small room in a tenement building which had been divided into eight rooms. The room was the size of their bunk-bed: my cousin’s two daughters slept on the top bunk, and my cousin, her husband, and their other child were on the lower bunk. I slept on a canvas bed, squeezed in at the side. Outside there was a makeshift lavatory for the whole house, and if anyone wanted to take a shower they had to wash there as well.

The Mark I blocks were the first, and the most basic designs from which all other Resettlement estates and HKHA designs would evolve. What drove these design changes? In the early days it appeared to be the Authorities’ own decision to shift from emergency housing to create a better environment for tenants. They did this gradually. As more

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*Lau Chin Shek, in Sally Blyth and Ian Wotherspoon (eds.) *Hong Kong Remembers*, Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1996*
blocks came on stream they revised the original design. The introduction in 1964 of the Mark III, which was built to a height of eight storeys, to a revised block configuration provided every home with a private balcony, water tap and access to a private lavatory shared between two or three families. There was also provision for electrical fittings and refuse chutes. For these added conveniences the rental was charged at a higher rate than the Mark I. With the introduction of the Mark III block, Fong maintains the Resettlement ethos had evolved from emergency housing to a fully fledged housing policy. Later versions of the Mark Blocks (IV, V & VII) were built to 16 storeys, with the Mark IV introducing, for the first time, self-contained facilities to enable each family to live independently of their neighbours thus giving them more privacy than before and a standard of internal finish in line with that comparable to the Government Low Cost Housing. In 1970 the space allocation of resettlement blocks was reviewed and increased to 35 sq. feet per person with a standard room in the Mark VI of approximately 140 square feet for four persons. In these self-contained flats the space allocation is areas measured as the space within the walls, exclusive of the verandah, toilet and public, giving a much higher overall floorspace area.

As children grew up, overcrowding in the older blocks became more of a problem. Families were able to apply to move to a bigger flat through a system of decantation but it was observed in 1968 that some were unwilling to move from the old estate even though they were living at very high densities.

The worst overcrowding is naturally found in the older estates where rooms rarely fall vacant and where many families who have even less that 16 sq. feet an adult refuse offers of larger rooms in the new estates. They prefer to tolerate discomfort than be cut off from their friends or change their place of work and the schools which their children attend.

For all the benefits of extra space a move to a new estate would entail a lot of additional expense: setting up costs, new school uniforms and travel. For many tenants, it is likely that stability might have been more important to them at that time than the desire for more space.

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27 Government Low-Cost Housing was introduced in 1962 and were managed by the HKHA to house families within the $400-$900 bracket. That is, those families who were in need of housing but did not fall into the HKHA bracket, 35 sq. feet per person. Built to “an extremely simple design” the accommodation consisted of a room with private balcony with tap and sink. Toilet facilities were communal.

28 Annual Report, Commissioner for Resettlement, 1970-71,
Also: By 1972 the Government started a programme of redevelopment of the older Mar I and II Blocks.

29 Annual Report, Commissioner for Resettlement, 1967-68
In general the internal design of the blocks does not appear to have been a cause for public dispute. One survey carried out in 1975 found that 81% of residents of Upper Ngau Tau Kok Estate were generally satisfied with their living environment. Mr. James Chien, Chairman of the Neighbourhood Advice-Action Council (NAC) observed that the usual terms used to describe high density housing such as, “pigeon holes”, “sardine tins”, and “concrete jungles” did not reflect the true picture. It was claimed there was a strong spirit of co-operation between residents and, although facilities were “fairly primitive”, the article goes on to report that residents made only “minimal demands for improvement”.

What the residents desire in physical improvements - kitchen and bathroom facilities, installation of mail boxes and storm-proof windows or louvre boards - are all reasonable and economically feasible.

It appears that density was not voiced as a problem - or at least as a problem that thought could be solved. Residents’ immediate domestic requirements could therefore be met through the provision of internal facilities rather than led by a demand or a total up-grade either in the space allocation or flat design.

As Government housing became the dwelling norm, the design of later HKHA blocks, the Slab, Twin Tower, Double-H, I and Linear blocks were still designed as a one room space. It was not until the introduction of the 1980’s late Trident blocks and 1990’s Harmony blocks, that tenants could plan their homes with dedicated spaces for bedrooms. However, problems with seepage again led to accusations of inferior building construction and raised the question of design standards and quality of housing within the public sector.

Home as a Commodity

As the public housing programme gathered pace in the mid-seventies, Y.K. Chan found that even when people were dissatisfied with their living space they maintained a realistic sense that in Hong Kong, “a more spacious environment cannot be achieved”. Their

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40 See “Sardine Tin’ myth exploded”, South China Morning Post, March 3 1975
41 Ibid.

Over ninety percent of the ninety two families responding to the interview indicated that they did not mind living in high density resettlement buildings and accepted it as the inevitable in Hong Kong because of its large population and lack of space.
conception of homespace was therefore, framed by the concept of Hong Kong as a 'small place' and of the difficulties of site formation and the lack of resources to build homes other than what was realistically attainable. This was, of course Government rhetoric, but it was consistent with the population's experience of earlier building forms - such as the subdivided tenement and squatter village. In Hong Kong space came to be perceived as a luxury; the prerogative of the rich and the expatriate. A spacious home would have been, and still is, outside of most people's expectation.

Hong Kong people quickly adapted to a market value of space which included the advantages of living in subsidised Public Housing. A link developed between people's expectation of a desirable living space and the complex economic balance between the release of Crown land, developer's profits, the public housing building programme, and the mortgage interest rates set by the banks. In effect, local knowledge of space, and density, has been shaped by complex economic factors, affecting people in their everyday life.

Until the 1960's the public housing of the decade of the 1950's alone offered to working-class people of the city a kind of accommodation in which a family was freed from the necessity of choice between being either exploiting tenant or exploited sub-tenant.°

Public Housing homes offered psychological security against the prohibitive market value of space in the private sector. Hong Kong's economic development from the mid-fifties has been linked to the provision of subsidised housing which ensured population stability, a steady supply of labour and market competitiveness. Castells et al." argue that the provision of housing was initially geared towards land clearance for the development of manufacturing rather than for any altruistic purposes. The creation of urban estates, close to where the workers lived, reduced the problem of mass transportation and facilitated the growth of small businesses within urban areas. Consequently, people became used to living in urban density and developed an expectation for shorter travel distance. Subsidised housing also gave residents more spending power: once they had paid for the preliminary decoration of the flat and budgeted for monthly rental payments they could purchase more consumer goods. A flat within the public housing programme therefore gave tenants psychological security of a lifetime of rent controlled housing and the advantage, and opportunity to use their disposable income to improve their lifestyle.

° Frank Leeming, op. cit. p. 24

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Perhaps, it was inevitable, that a public housing programme which was designed to improve the situation for low-income families would then become abused as the situation changed and residents became better off. The waiting list for public housing currently stands at 150,000 yet many residents are unwilling to give up their flat despite owning private property elsewhere. There are also many cases where the legal tenant has moved out and passed the flat to relatives to keep the registration in the family. Others have emigrated yet continue to maintain the HKHA flat as their base in Hong Kong. There are even more obvious signs of affluence by the number of expensive makes of cars parked on these estates. But there is little the Housing Authority can do either to prove or police this phenomenon. Even with the double rent for better off tenants still maintains the rent well below the market rate.

Unlike other countries, C.K. Lau argues, in Hong Kong there is no stigma attached to public housing, and taken overall it may be beneficial to the estate to have some better off tenants living there. He points out it may not be fair to single out property owners without acknowledging how other families allocate their wealth, for example in jewellery or stocks and shares. In this respect the HKHA has become a victim of its own success. Undoubtedly Hong Kong people have benefited from the public housing programme as a whole. Clearly, many Hong Kong families perceive subsidised housing as a way of saving money and as a personal asset. It is the long-term HKHA tenants living in the older, smaller property, who arguably benefit the most. For example, one family that I interviewed was living at a very high density. However, sometime in the immediate future they expected the older children would get married and move out. With this in mind they were fully prepared to put up with the density in the short-term rather than move to a bigger space, at a higher rent, which would leave the widowed mother alone to pay a higher rent for the extra, unnecessary, space. While a move to the new Trident, and Harmony blocks gives tenants the advantage of more space in a better designed flat they may have reservations about the cost of relocation and higher rent. But, in addition to this, the higher quality of space also puts pressure on residents to raise their present standard of home decoration appropriate to the new environment, or to put it another way, to create an appropriate domestic lifestyle at least on par with their neighbours.

C. K. Lau “ How The Poor May Inherit The Estates” South China Morning Post, November 2nd, 1994

Eviction would not only be socially very disruptive, but could also be economically counter-productive because of its unpredictable impact on the private housing market. Moreover, we want our public housing estates to be thriving communities, not slums, and the surest way of achieving this objective is not to confine them only (sic) the poor.
Bourdieu, in the preface to the English language edition of Distinction, admits that it is a “very French” book. He recognises that its “Frenchness” is expressed through the specificity of the French tradition, culture, society and popular culture of the data. At the very heart of Distinction, and the heart of the French social system, is a class framework. But can this theory of habitus apply to Hong Kong, described as a class-less society?

Over the past twenty years Hong Kong has witnessed tremendous social mobility. The values and experiences of this generation, as a product of an advanced industrialised society, have been shaped by quite different social, political and environmental circumstances from the previous generation. In one survey carried out in 1986 Lau and Kuan discovered that people today are less inclined to see themselves in the same social stratum as their parents. Indeed, nearly 70% respondents considered themselves to be middle class which according to the authors can be attributed to the fact that most people see little difference between their life-situation and others. Given that most Hong Kong families are first generation immigrants combined with the fact that density and the cost of accommodation has affected almost everyone in the same way, it is not surprising that the class mentality is so closely related to economics and the standard of living.

The belief in equality of opportunity, the expectation that one’s efforts will pay off, general acceptance of the legitimacy of income distribution through the market and actual experience of improvement in one’s standard of living, all work to dampen perception of classes and class conflict.


The habitus is both the generative principle of objectively classifiable judgements and the system of classification (principium divisionis) of these practices. It is in the relationship between the two capacities which define the habitus, the capacity to produce classifiable practices and works, and the capacity to differentiate and appreciate these practices and products (taste), that the represented social world, i.e., the space of life-styles, is constituted.

Lau Siu-Kai & Kuan Hsin-Chi, op. cit., p. 66

44.2 percent of respondents classified their parents as belonging to the lower class, 25.6 percent the lower-middle class, 20.2 per cent the middle-middle class, 3.3 percent the upper-middle class and 1.3 percent the upper class.

Ibid., p. 66. 26.3 per cent respondents saw themselves as lower class, 31.9 percent in the lower-middle class, 36.7 percent the middle-middle class and 2.4 percent the upper-middle class and 2.4 per cent saw themselves in the upper class.

see also Tai-lok Lui, Hong Kong’s New Middle Class: Its Formation and Politics in Hsin-Huan Michael Hsiao (ed.) Discovery of The Middle Classes in East Asia, Taipei, Taiwan: Institute of Ethnology Academia Sinica, 1993, p. 249. Here Lui classifies the new middle class as professional, administrative and managerial employees who might have specific expertise and be involved in some capacity of management in their place of employment.

Lau Siu-kai & Kuan Hsin-chi, op. cit., p. 65
Education is one factor that has contributed towards increased social mobility, a growing professional class and, inevitably, a change in social expectations. Significantly, from common grass-roots there has emerged a New Middle Class, a first generation social class.

Therefore it is not unreasonable to assume that many professional, administrative, and managerial employees moved from modest family back-grounds to their present new middle class positions...the case of Hong Kong, being a newly industrialized society which started to develop during the 1950's presents an instance of a newly emerged class of professional, administrative, and managerial employees who possess a very limited sense of demographic identity.

It could be said that the New Middle Class shaped their future through their conscious determination to achieve a better life for themselves and their family. Salaff describes one young woman in the 1970's whose daily life was driven by her long-term plans.

Chin yiu’s employment trajectory from factory to office illustrates concretely her success in personal forecasting. Her marriage delay was consistent with her long-term personal and family economic planing. She conceived the planning powers as integral to her entire approach to life. Chin-yiu thus postponed consumer spending and an early wedding in favour of a heavy burden of vocational education, office work, and determined frugality in order eventually to achieve a higher standard of living and social status for herself, the Lams and her future family, which her upward vision would shape.

The New Middle Class have created, and occupy, a distinct level of Hong Kong society where none existed before. Their economic attainment has affected other aspects of their social dimension. Homeownership, for example, has shifted the idea of home and quality of space, not just as a commodity but as lifestyle. Lui observes, this is a lifestyle in the making. This new social strata of Hong Kong is moving up from a relatively homogeneous class. And, as a first generation middle class there is no example of a middle class style to follow.

As the individuals occupying new middle-class positions are “first generation” with diverse personal backgrounds and mobility experiences, it is unlikely that they will follow a distinctive life-style and exhibit a particular socio-cultural outlook.

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50 Once the mainstay of the 1960’s, factory work has mainly shifted to China to take advantage of cheap labour. Young people today might expect to seek employment in the service industry.
51 Lui Tai-Lok, "Hong Kong’s New Middle Class: Its formations and Politics", in Michael, Hsiao, Hsin-Huang, (ed.) *Discovery of the Middle Classes in East Asia*, Taipei, Taiwan: Institute of Ethnology Academica Sinica, 1993, p.256
52 Janet Salaff *op. cit.*, p. 194
53 Lui Tai-lok, *op. cit.*, p. 258
As a new strata of society has prompted a new consumer options in the development of a private housing designs in new locations and styles facilitating wider consumer options. For the existing working class, who still live in rented public housing, this New Middle Class represent an attainable lifestyle to follow or emulate thereby developing their own lifestyle expectations.

This newly emerged middle class shares common memories, residues and linkages to the past, and to society as a whole. A common memory was of “a busy home industry, such as assembling of plastic flowers, or sewing decorations on sweaters”. This memory of the family at home, engaged in piecework, and other everyday activities is a bond that links many people who grew up in the sixties. These are more than just memories of activities, but memories of space and home. Given that the majority of the population are living, or have moved from Government housing the perceived homogenisation of class should come as little surprise and indeed features strongly within Hong Kong people’s collective consciousness.

Europeans in Hong Kong could generally expect a higher salary that the average Chinese. It would also cost more for Europeans to maintain what they would consider to be a minimum standard of living compared to Chinese. According to Topley:

The levels of income at which Chinese and Westerners consider people to be poor, comfortably off, or rich usually diverge widely even among Chinese and Westerners of the same education and occupation.... what constitutes a minimum wage and living standard.

It was the Chinese conception that the bigger the house, the greater the display of wealth. However, this luxury was only to be sanctioned after everything else on the demand schedule had been secured. Chinese who were wealthy enough to be able to enjoy a large home were seen to have taken care of all other social obligations. One such obligation was children’s education. This was considered to be a worthwhile yet, often costly, investment since professional qualifications would raise the child’s (and family’s) social status and would provide more lucrative opportunities for long term family security. In this respect,
immigrants tended to have large families which tied up their capital in the cost of education.

Housing was regarded as a preferential commodity but a flat could give more return if it was sub-divided or rented out. Saving for old age was also important as the uncertainty of the future, without a State pension, made it essential to provide for a time when they could not work for a living. Capital therefore should be carefully invested to make some return, rather than spent on luxuries – or on luxuries that would not be seen.

Bourdieu states that the working class, deprived of necessary goods adapts, and is resigned, to a taste borne out of (a taste of) necessity. They identify to a class condition those properties that are actually assigned in the classifications of class habitus. Bourdieu points out that the working classes, consumed by the need to save money, will surround themselves with objects that create maximum effect at minimum cost. He maintains that the resignation to necessity conforms to a popular taste where the individual would not want to be seen to distinguish his or herself from the group. People have what they like because they like what they have. Because of this, he claims, they will conform to a taste that identifies them with their social class, towards a stereotype of what they think is suitable for them. They see themselves as “simple” and “modest” people with “simple” and “modest” tastes which sets the limits of consumer choice to what they see as suitable for them. Thus, by conforming to a particular taste they limit their scope to try out new ideas that might make them stand out as being different. Does this remove the need to make decisions of their own through the use of established conventions or can we say that their ability, and know-how to establish these conventions is in itself a legitimate spatial knowledge?

To answer this we need to consider more closely the methods of representing space adopted by Hong Kong public housing tenants.

In the early blocks families who were living in the 120 sq. feet rooms would normally opt to erect a cockloft to free up space below. Hopkins describes the arrangements in the

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58 Pierre Bourdieu, op. cit., p. 379

Festive meals and ‘Sunday best’ clothes are opposed to everyday meals and clothes by the arbitrariness of a conventional division - ‘doing things properly’ - just as the rooms socially designated for ‘decoration’, the sitting room, the dining room or living room, are opposed to everyday places, that is, by the antithesis which is more or less that of the ‘decorative’ and the ‘practical’, and they are decorated in accordance with established conventions, with knick-knacks on the mantelpiece, a forest scene over the sideboard, flowers on the table, without any of these obligatory choices implying decisions or a search for effect.

home of one family of seven living in Shek Kip Mei estate.

A bed has been placed at one end of the room, and by its side, all the clothes are stuffed together in an old drawer. A cockloft is built right across the top just above the bed, and it is also a place for storing things like blankets and eiderdowns as well as being the place for daughters to sleep. Other furniture, e.g., a wine cupboard, refrigerator, wardrobe, etc. are all placed by the walls surrounding the room. Thus a space is left in the middle of the room for the boys to sleep at night and for the family to have their meals on rainy days. The large machine for knitting sweaters is placed on one side of the room by the door...This household, like its neighbours puts all its waterbuckets, kitchen cupboards and stoves outside the room in the corridor, thus allowing more living space for the family within the room.40

GIS41 images of these homes taken in the early 1970's period indicate the use of old style wooden furniture, likely to have been in the family for some time. (Plate 10) These might include some heavy wooden stools, a folding table, or camp bed, and perhaps a lockable metal box, or metal storage drum and an upright fan. In the most densely packed space there might still be a place reserved for a glass fronted wooden wine cabinet (for brandy and Chinese wine) where the family might display framed studio family photographs and treasured knickknacks and display tea things. There would be little by way of soft furnishings other than a curtain around the parents' bed. However, although the whitewashed walls may be peeling, the flooring a cold and bare concrete floor the room might still exhibit a small show of luxury, such as a fancy lamp, or range of ornaments.42

Bourdieu contends that the submission to necessity inclines the working class to a pragmatic, functionalist 'aesthetic'. He is referring here to a principle of conformity to a pattern of consumption which, through their low-income status limits people to a taste of necessity, in the case of Hong Kong at one time this was common to most of the population. Bourdieu's theory of habitus tends towards general observations of class based on external differences which, he claims, results from internalised conditions of existence. He does not consider how the choice of the necessary relates to space per se. In Hong Kong there were other factors in the context of representing space not limited to class outlook. First, in the 1950's there would have been a strong conformity to traditional cultural practices. Many of these people would have come from a rural society in China.

Of the 92 families responding to the interview, 85 of them used at least one bunk bed, 26 families had built "cocklofts", and 31 families used at least one canvas folding bed.

41 Government Information Service
42 Selected GIS photos.
which would have affected how they perceived and appropriated domestic space. Secondly, the density and the configuration of the layout created physical constraints which would affect the spatial representation. Thirdly, compared to today, there were less choices in furniture and consumer products on the market which would have contributed to the similarity in domestic space styles, and forms.

Bourdieu recognises ordinary experience as a legitimate knowledge and closely observes how the issue of legitimate culture is associated with the dominant class. This might also be applied to the perception of dominant Western spatial norms where values implicit within a high density dwelling have to be justified as a legitimate knowledge against the dominant view of space.

The experiences which the culturally most deprived may have of works of legitimate culture ...is only one form of a more fundamental and more ordinary experience, that of the division between the practical, partial, tacit know-how, and theoretical, systematic, explicit knowledge.  

The visibility of the habitus makes it easily identifiable as represented space but, Bourdieu points out, this is only the surface of a “fundamental and ordinary experience”, of a deeper knowledge. Miller argues that habitus is learnt through “interactive practices, as the acts of living within a world” and is reinforced in different physical domains as a process of familiarity rather than learning, absorbed for example through familiar spaces and places. It is reasonable to assume therefore, that the habitus of contemporary HKHA homespaces must be shaped by a disposition towards high density spaces. And, implicit within this experience is a taken for granted, practical knowledge gained from past practices, past experience and a system of order developed and evolved over the past forty years of living with this quality of space. It is also a knowledge firmly established within the Hong Kong consciousness for the way homespace is physically and mentally represented today.

Changing The Habitus

There are no documented oral accounts of residents' design knowledge to refer to that might help us to trace their design knowledge over the past forty years. There are, however a wide selection of photographs by the GIS depicting public housing interiors that provide a rich source of visual data. Leaving aside, the underlying propaganda

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62 Pierre Bourdieu, op. cit., p. 387
element of "information" for which these were intended, these images are a good record of an evolutionary style and material representation of the habitus.

One GIS photograph shows a family delightedly moving into their Resettlement estate home. The bare blockwork walls, concrete floor and wooden shutters on the window indicate a space that looks more like an industrial building, or garage than a potential home. The family's few meagre possessions, a kerosene stove, a pot and some bedclothes stand alone in the empty space. There is no visible furniture. Even if the GIS stage-managed the event for publicity or propaganda, there does not appear to be any attempt to show the home as anything other than a crude space.

For many new tenants the Resettlement and Low-Cost housing estates in the 1950's and 1960's may have been their first proper home in Hong Kong. Despite their low-income status families were often prepared to spend a sizeable portion of their income to have a comfortable home environment. This was not however, purely aesthetic or decorative treatments since many tenants were still expected to provide their own metal grilles for the balcony and doorway as well as the installation of light fittings and sockets.

In 1968 the Commissioner for Resettlement noted a growing level of consumption, and standard of living reflected in the decoration of homes within the Resettlement estates.

Domestic rooms when handed over the tenants are no more than roughly finished concrete shells, but practically no tenant ever moves straight in. He engages one of the many small contractors who earn their living by decorating and equipping rooms during the period of initial occupation of estate blocks. These decorators install various kinds of floor surfacing, install glazed windows and put up protective grilles to cover the verandah opening. An increasing number of tenants possess sophisticated electrical appliances: electric rice cookers are very common, and even refrigerators and television sets no longer attract surprised comment. It is not unusual for a tenant to spend over $1000 on initial improvements and furniture for his new home, and some may lay out $3000, or more in this way... It seems that the majority of tenants intend to create a flat which, however small, will serve as the family's permanent home in the foreseeable future.

The floor might be left in the original concrete finish until the family could save up for, or felt the need to buy, linoleum, or vinyl floortiles. Walls were mostly whitewashed, though some tenants, opting for a higher standard of finish might have them plastered. After the

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65 GIS#6157/5 Tai Hung Tung fire victims moved from Yan Oi Camp to Shek Lai Resettlement Estate 1969
66 see HKRS 70 6/827 (1) - Upper Pak Tin Estate
installation of electricity in every block tenants would have been able to make use of electrical appliances as well as lighting and a fan for ventilation. Low-income families living on a Resettlement Estates were observed to have more expensive consumer items than those in squatter villages, and the longer they lived on the estate the more items they were able to acquire. The authorities laid down strict guidelines concerning what tenants could and could not do to the flat.

Tenants were permitted to plaster the walls, but not to install windows on the balcony, since this obstructs ventilation, not to tile the floors during the initial six months maintenance period.

By 1970 the Commissioner for Resettlement noted that on-site decorators were creating a nuisance for management, and carrying out work outside of the department’s rules. This led to the setting up of a register of permitted decorators who would be permitted to work on site on behalf of residents. The rules stated that tenants had to apply for permission if they wanted to make any internal changes to the flat. They were normally permitted to erect internal partitions but these had to stop short of the ceiling and floor level, for ventilation purposes. When tenants first moved in these rules were strictly enforced.

One of the first things that one notices from these GIS images of domestic space is the tidiness of the homes. This should make us question the selectivity of sampling as it is likely the GIS would only want to show those interiors which are a favourable reflection of Hong Kong homes. However, these are an authentic, carefully documented record of real homes. The GIS Images may be prime examples showing only those families who have coped well exceptionally with density but nonetheless they provide a valuable historical account of interior spaces of the period.

One image taken in Shek Kip Mei estate in the early 1970's shows a spatial quality which

\[\text{Hong Kong Annual Departmental Report by the Commissioner for Resettlement Annual report 1969-70}\]

It was thought that not all tenants could afford an electricity supply and it was therefore left to each tenant that did want it to provide his own external wiring from the meter board, as well as internal wiring. This wiring has not been properly maintained and it has now become worn and potentially dangerous. It has been decided that rather than require tenants themselves to remedy this position the wiring should be replaced by the Government, the cost being recovered from the tenants in the form of an increase in rent.

\[\text{Otto Golger op., cit., p. 39}\]

\[\text{Annual Report Commissioner for Resettlement 1970-71 see also RD 2/271/69 28th February 1972 a note from I. M Lightbody, Commissioner for Resettlement to the Commissioner for Housing Donald Liao, urging him to consider up-grading the standard of finishes in the Resettlement estates to provide: metal balcony grilles, folding metal door, tiling in toilet and plastering of walls.}\]

\[\text{Annual Report, Commissioner for Resettlement 1969-70}\]
many Hong Kong people might judge to be more typical of a Hong Kong interior. (Plate 11). It is a chaotic space which expresses density as a slum. We see what looks like a folding table and two wooden beds placed perpendicularly under a cockloft which is screened by a highly patterned curtain. Underneath the beds there are various storage drums, trunks and basins. Clothes hanging below the cockloft add to the visual disorder. What is most striking about this image is the prominent display of photographs depicting various family groups in formal studio settings, placed together in a frame. In the middle of the chaos there is still an attempt to beautify and humanise the space.

Is there anything we can learn about design knowledge from this image? Or is it patronising to read this space for design when, evidently, it is an evolutionary ad hoc method of spatial arrangement. Would this space look very different today? Possibly not. Many Hong Kong homes appeared to have changed little over the years. Would this space look different if it was inhabited by a French family, or if the space itself was not in Hong Kong but in France? It is very likely it would be different. But it is hard to say exactly how yet we would expect it to be represented according to a different set of cultural practices and worldview.

This image is a useful reference and comparison to the majority of other GIS images which depict those families who appear to have coped very well in appropriating public housing living space. The changing habitus, can be usefully traced in these images and is worth articulating as a physical representation of the changing material and consumer culture. Long-term residents are more likely to build their home based on existing layers of furniture, material culture and consumer goods.

In most contemporary Hong Kong homes residents make effective use of vertical space with large floor-to-ceiling cabinets. In homes of the 1950’s and 1960’s residents were using a style of furniture that was neither space saving or designed for high density living. It was a traditional design, in wood, not unlike the bulky British Utility style, and appears to be the only style of furniture that was available, or affordable, by people at that time. (Plate 12)

Residents had more cabinet surfaces and wall space on which to display things, consequently these homes look neat and often more spacious than homes today.⁷

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⁷ In most contemporary homes surfaces can be a problem as they tend to be used as a convenient place where clutter accumulates. In the GIS images surfaces are almost always shown empty, or used for a carefully arranged display.
Within the range of furniture style most families would have had a wine cabinet, and side board. They might also have had single seater chairs, which today would be seen to be an inflexible use of space. (Plate 13) A later development from this, which is still common today, is the hard wooden seating bench with built-in drawers underneath. Sewing machines would have been part of most homes, as outworking was still very common\(^7\). The metal tube (Chinese style) bunk beds were clearly the most popular type of bed and were both space saving and practical.

For privacy tenants might use a full height curtain around the bed, although this affected the flow of air in the summer. As Tong points out, residents may have opted to sleep on the floor where it was cooler\(^7\). Beds might be visually softened by a printed fabric skirt to conceal storage hidden underneath, a shelf erected inside the bed might also be curtained.

Aesthetically, residents used various decorative devices to improve the look of the flat. Lacy antimacassars were much in evidence on the backs of seating on the top of the TV and on the side board. Every home had a display of plastic flowers - today replaced by silk. Traditionally framed family photographs may be hung high up on the walls, a combination of family images representing the dead and the living. Most families used folding dining tables, still commonly used today.

In Tong’s study, only 50% of residents admitted that storage was a problem. He found residents might use formal methods such as free standing wooden wardrobes and chests or suspended cabinets but more commonly they used *ad hoc* methods such as cardboard boxes and buckets or piled their belongings onto the top bunk\(^7\). As a student architect, Tong could see the inadequacies in using this form of storage and questioned why residents did not think to make better use of the space by using the full height\(^7\).

Although the tenants were living in a minimum space and many did complain that storage was a difficult problem, it is startling to note that only so few had taken a step further other than buying readymade free standing storage furniture, which for economical and easy transportation reasons is made to certain standards and this generally cannot suit the limiting space in the flat well. Furthermore, some of these occupy much floor area but can store only a tiny volume, such as the very popular short wardrobe and the side board\(^7\).

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\(^7\) There are very few images which include the sewing machine – an essential element in piecework.

\(^7\) Tong King Pun, Jim, *Space Utilization in Estate Flats & Their Immediate Surroundings*, University of Hong Kong Masters Thesis, 1969-70

\(^7\) Tong King Pun, Jim, *op. cit.*

\(^7\) *Ibid.* p. 35. Tong found that less than one third of respondents made use of the higher level for storage.

\(^7\) *Ibid.*, p. 33
Tong observed, tenants were often prepared to put up with the inconvenience of disorder and storage problems caused by using ready-made free-standing units rather than negotiate with the authorities to re-partition the space. The "problem" of storage was something people had got used to but did not see it as something they could control. Only 19% in Tong's study claimed that they consciously planned to reduce storage in the future by throwing things out, 37% said they would move to another flat, if possible and 40% had no plan how they would deal with this problem. It is likely residents were responding spontaneously without having given the question any serious thought. As HKHA tenants, ultimately they might have felt there was nothing they could do about the situation. As one respondent explained:

The amount of space is fixed, what else can we do. Can you tell them to give me a larger flat?

In almost every image of domestic interiors from the 1950's through to the '70's no home was complete without the wooden glass fronted wine cabinet. Indeed one family from my own interviews still had theirs in the 1990's. Given the amount of floorspace it occupied, it was not a particularly efficient storage system. The emphasis here, on display seems to be an important cultural aspect of the way the homespace was organised over-ruling practical or functional concerns.

Throughout the 1960's consumer items such as televisions (often on legs) refrigerators, washing machines, radiograms and coffee tables were becoming fixed features in most homes, changing the focus of the space layout. (Plate 14) For example, the refrigerator would have to be placed in the living area as there was no space in the kitchen. As television came to dominate the radio as the main consumer item in the home tenants had to arrange their seating for easy viewing. (Plate 15)

As Salaff recorded in the '70's, often these products appeared in the midst of a very crowded and cluttered space.

A single resettlement room, 10' by 12' housed all seven children and two adults of Wai-gun's family. A cotton curtain subdivided the room into a windowless inner area, which contained a pair of bunk beds wide enough to sleep two people on each level, and a bureau. The outer area nearest the door and the balcony was a bedroom/livingroom with another double bunk bed, a cluster of shelves with a family shrine and some accumulated

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7 Ibid., p. 34
7 Ibid., p. 37
objects that and gathered dust for years, a television set, and a small refrigerator for bottled drinks. The phone rested on the television.

A home of the 1950s might just as easily describe a home in the 1970s as in this example from Salaff's study. The basic furniture might be the same, the only obvious difference being in the number of electrical appliances and style of calendars and posters. Older residents, in particular, who had experienced economic hardship were more likely to keep things and less likely to buy new items. Large pieces of furniture such as metal bunkbeds might become unfashionable, but did not wear out, could be used by the same family for decades.

The HKHA blocks built in late 60's and early seventies period were still built to the open room space of the Slab, Linear, Cruciform, Double-H and Twin Tower forms. But, under the revised space allocation residents had slightly more space than before. There was gradual move from the old-fashioned hardwood and glass partition towards a more modern version made of plastic laminate with wood effect. (Plates 16, 17)

Foldable, furniture (tables, beds and stools) began to replace the old heavy wooden variety, which gave greater flexibility in the use of space. Dexion frame units became a popular storage system. They were easy to erect and could be built to full height. Family photographs and calendars prevailed as the main decorative items. The telephone, while it was still considered to be a household luxury, might be placed in a prominent position in the home.

Salaff observed how a move from an old tenement block to a new private flat, created a shift in the family's concerns for domestic space. For example, one family decided that their old tenement style furniture was not considered appropriate for the new flat.

The living room became the display area of the house. The old serviceable but undecorative furniture, which was now considered out of place, was given away or sold and replaced by new matching furniture purchased in installments. The living room contained a rocker, several padded chairs, a plastic imitation teak dinner table, which did not fold up and hence occupied much space, several tea tables, folding stools, a stuffed sofa covered in velour, and a large commode in which was displayed the hi-fi set and records, knicknacks of glass, pottery, peacock feathers, a teacup set, and empty but decorative 10-pound box of Swiss chocolates, and an unopened, 2-foot high bottle of VSOP brandy.....

80 Janet W. Salaff, op., cit., p.92
81 Ibid., p. 215
Ng claims there were already signs of an emerging modern domestic ideal in the 1970's. The younger generation emerging from a working-class background were tending towards a nuclear family home which was continually re-reinforced in home journals and simulations of home in shop displays. From this point we start to see how homespace is becoming more socially prescribed by a dominant style, recognisable in terms of aesthetics, placement and cohesiveness as design. Ng, claims this new ideal of the Hong Kong home enforced through the media is “clean, hygienic, comfortable, tasteful, nurturing and most of all, private”.

In keeping with the rise and influence of the new middle class the policy of the HKHA has been to introduce different types of blocks within the same estate. This gives greater diversity in the estate environment and a variety homes to suit different family needs. Castells points out that the main causes of dissatisfaction among tenants was mainly associated with increases in rent rather than density, or design. For example, Mr. Mok Ying-fan, spokesman for residents of the redeveloped Mark IV Tung Tau estate complained that Housing Department designers were over-stressing the aesthetic side knowing little of the nature of public housing.

Over the course of the 1980's an air-conditioner or washing machine were no longer considered to be luxury items, most families had a television, stereo and perhaps a VCR. Locally produced furniture designed specially for high density housing provided residents with a better utilisation of space through full height storage units with cupboards, shelving and display. On-site contractors would not only do the basic preparation work to the flat but would also give tenants advice on the best way of using space and could build custom-made units to fit any space within the home. The so-called Western style bunkbeds with built in storage became commonplace in both the new blocks (replacing the old fashioned metal type) and were especially popular with younger families.

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The main causes for dissatisfaction were concerned basically the resistance to rent increases, the lack of insulation in the buildings, the distance of the new developments from working places, the lack of public facilities or such a large housing population, the right to have the family's married sons and daughters living in the flats, and the extension of the public housing program to households of one or two persons.

83 See Hong Kong Standard 14 December, 1987. Residents complained that the doors were set back two or three feet from the wall for the corridor which would give enough space for a thief to hide. The revised design also opted for central mail boxes rather than door to door delivery. There were also complaints about a new laundry system where the window grilles fold down leaving no protection against the window while the laundry is hung out to dry.
The increase in space allocation coincided with a reduction in the birth-rate. Parents, having less children, could indulge them with luxuries they themselves might have missed out on as children. The New Middle Class ethos, to educate and nurture children is reflected in the way the space was used; buying a piano, or computer, and expecting children to have their own beds - or bedrooms. Children's popular culture is more evident throughout the home in the form of stickers, cartoon merchandise, small plastic chairs and tables. Ng claims that the growth in local women's journals reflects a new demand on women to have a home of “tasteful nurturance and relaxation” where the home should be tastefully decorated by the mother for the family. The media influence marks a shift in the way the home is perceived among its readers, where taste and style are promoted over purely functional considerations.

According to Topley, it was considered a turning point for a Hong Konger to feel the need to externalise wealth as space, against what was a customary and traditional caginess about showing the extent of their wealth. Greater exposure to alternative types of housing together with influence from media has affected mainly the younger generation who have a higher expectation of the quality of domestic space. To cater for this interest there is now a glut of home decorating magazines on the newstands and increasingly, shops provide a wider range of furniture available for different tastes, styles and price levels. There are also more interior designers, decorators and contractors offering a professional service in design, creating more awareness of design within the general public.

Hong Kong currently has six Universities and more tertiary level places than at any other time in its history. In Wong & Yue’s 1988 study into satisfaction in various life domains, education stood out as the domain in which most people expressed dissatisfaction with housing, surprisingly, much further down the list of concerns. Education clearly remains

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64 Ng Chun Hung, “Cultural Studies”, Elizabeth Sinn (ed.) Culture and Society in Hong Kong. Centre of Asian Studies Occasional paper no. 116 Hong Kong: The University of Hong Kong, 1995, p. 16
65 A glance through some of the current locally produced home decorating magazines today shows a seemingly endless supply of people who are keen to show off their wealth publicly through their homes - reflecting perhaps the increased affluence of the Territory. These are, of course, homes in the luxury range of the market, with expensively fitted interiors by contracted interior designers. See also M. Topley op. cit. p. 196. Topley’s observation in 1969 of the prevalence of this trend among Westernised Chinese.
66 Wong Siu-lun & Shirley Yue, “Satisfaction in Various Life Domains” in Lau Siu-kai, Lee Ming-kwan, Wan Po-san & Wong Siu-lun (eds.) Indicators of Social Development, Hong Kong 1988, Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong. 1991. Wong and Yue expressed these findings as a “thirst for education”. Just over a third of respondents had only primary education but had major aspirations that their sons and daughters would achieve tertiary level education. The writers do not have any definite answers for these findings but suggest that this mass concern for education could either be linked to strong Confucian traditions, or a view that education and credentials would bring economic returns.
a priority on the demand schedule and, with fewer children, there is increased support for them to attend higher education. Young people today have more chance of finishing secondary education and a greater opportunity to achieve a higher level of education than their parents. In the tertiary level Institutes where English is the official language of instruction, students are more exposed to English texts, films and music. Unlike their parents, they may have travelled extensively on business and for leisure and have had greater exposure to different cultures, spaces and places, styles and attitudes. Increasingly, the young and the educated encounter Western thinking with greater access to foreign media, ideas and practices. Since the 1950's and 1960's traditional Chinese values have been diluted by Western influences so that the gap between traditional Chinese ethos and the Hong Kong lifestyle widens with each generation.

Hong Kong's Mr. or Ms Average is 34 years old, earns $9,500 a month and likely to be single.... Upwardly mobile, he or she is likely to start work later, after pursuing a university-level education, speak more foreign languages and put off marriage as careers take precedence over a family...

It appears that young people are not only demanding and enjoying a better standard of living but they are willing to pay for it. In the new Trident and Harmony Blocks, for example, the HKHA supply bathtubs and full sanitary ware as well as kitchen fittings. When tenants move in they are prepared to change these for their own choice of a better quality and more expensive fittings.

There is a new habitus that is shaping the way people design their homes. It is obvious that ordinary Hong Kong people now have the opportunity, and are finding the confidence, to express themselves through wider design choices in their home. (App.1: PS3)

We're just ordinary. Now when you look around our neighbours, (homes) they're great, really. We're not the only ones. Maybe it's because you think that our colours...lighter...comfortable, do you? But colours... it depends on what people like... As you talk about money, a lot of people are very willing to spend... it's true, not just us.

The evident ability of new tenants to articulate their newly discovered design knowledge is a distraction from the substantial layers of spatial knowledge that exist from previous dwelling experiences of living in higher density but which might not be so easily

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5 South China Morning Post, November 6 1996
6 Wong Siu-lun & Shirley Yue, op. cit., Most respondents (63.8%) in this 1988 survey felt that their life had improved in the past three years. When asked what their first priority would be in improving their family life this was highlighted by 37.2% though it is noted that 13.2% did not know - how to answer the question or what to improve in their family life?
articulated. There are contradictions between the dominated and dominant taste, between Western domestic values of the modern ideal home, and the local interpretation of this within a high density space.

There are clearly more complex questions associated with the physical representation of the habitus. As Bourdieu notes, in making everyday choices, in clothing, furnishing or cooking the resident reveals deep-rooted dispositions linked to social origins more than to subsequent education. The individual’s present disposition and knowledge of quality, taste, space and style stems from early childhood experience from daily contact with represented spaces and the social order in which that space is seen. Although lifestyle can be read from the style residents adopt, from their familiarity with different objects, and the qualities of space they create, clearly it is not just the visibility of the lifestyle and how or why it is produced that matters. It is the way in which the physical space is internalised that is: “through bodily experiences which may be profoundly unconscious as the quiet caress of beige carpets or the thin clamminess of tattered garish linoleum.” What is so remarkable about Hong Kong domestic space is not the quality of density per se but how this creates a sensibility that is shared and deeply rooted in the experience and memory of Hong Kong space and place.

Pilot Study 3

Pierre Bourdieu, op. cit., p. 77
PART 2
INTRODUCTION
The Family In The Cockloft

If one were to trace the experience of Hong Kong density one might begin with a black and white photograph taken in 1968 by the Government Information Service. Photograph # 4882 (Plate18) shows a grandmother, mother, a small child and baby sitting tightly together in a suspended cockloft structure that is, we suppose, their home. The whole structure is fenced in by a crude wooden balustrade. It is a bare platform, floored with rattan mats that is maybe only four feet below the ceiling; too low for an adult to stand up. The family have attempted to make this space homely by covering the walls and ceiling with a gaily-patterned wall paper. Yet, this only makes a more poignant contrast with the grim scene below, where one can see people working in what appears to be a textile factory. Above the machinery hang bright fluorescent lights, above that the walls are roughly covered in layers of peeling plastic sheeting and newspaper. It might be a scene from the industrial revolution, but it is supposed to depict a typical Hong Kong home environment of only thirty years ago.

From this image it is easy to empathise with this family’s predicament; yet their situation was not unique. This was a colony pushed to the brink by a seemingly endless tide of immigrants and hopelessly inadequate housing. It is possible this family might not have realised their situation was quite so desperate or that they lived in what we see as abject poverty since at that time most people were reduced to similarly poor levels of housing.

A combination of crowded conditions, poor housing and poverty forced people to make the most of whatever accommodation they could find; such conditions were an everyday part of Hong Kong life. A colleague remembered her childhood living in part of her uncle’s garage, another recalls growing up in a windowless room at the back of their family shop. Yet another colleague recounted his student days in a tenement cubicle and felt himself lucky compared to families who could only rent a cockloft.

Looking closely at the photograph one sees that the family are well dressed and smiling for the cameras, they look fit and well and the cockloft is clean. One suspects they are huddled together in this way not because they live in sixteen square feet, but to enable the GIS photographer to make these conditions look more densely packed than it really is. One can infer, that this scene was to some extent staged by the GIS as a counterpart to new public estate construction as part of a comprehensive propaganda campaign after the riots of 1967 to show the Government’s concern for community building. Within the same series (one of the biggest in the GIS collection) images of crowded tenements, showing
people living in very primitive conditions are contrasted with images of families in their new Government flats whose homes are spacious, modern and clean. In this one collection the images show the Government's concern for Hong Kong families, the promise of better homes and an improved lifestyle.

Whatever happened to the family in the photograph? One may speculate that the baby in the photograph would be about thirty, she might be a Hong Kong Polytechnic graduate, who runs a property business with her husband, drives a Mercedes Benz and owns a couple of flats in Taikoo Shing - an example of the new middle class in this socially mobile society. Her grandmother may be alive and well and living with her son and daughter-in-law in Toronto. Her brother may run his own joint venture factory in China, hold a Canadian passport and send his children to a private international school. It may only be thirty years ago but the rags to riches stories experienced over one generation are based on truth. The cliché that Hong Kong's poorest-looking hawker could have put all his children through university, plays the stock market, and the horses, and lives in a neat apartment in Mei Foo reminds us that such documentary images must be approached with care. As for the family in the cockloft, we may speculate that they may have chosen to live there, either to keep a closer eye on their factory or to save money for a business of their own. The problem here is identifying what is the reality of the situation, when what appears as obvious can be entirely misleading.

Attempting to uncover historical changes in the Hong Kong people's responses to density presents the problem of sources and interpretation. As we have seen visual evidence is ambiguous. One photograph taken of an early Resettlement Estate reads c. 1950, but turns out to be 1975. It is clear that quantitative indicators are not enough to 'read' density in Hong Kong public housing and we must turn instead to its residents, to their experience and memories.

Since living in low-income public housing in Hong Kong is by no means a stigma of poverty and does not necessarily predetermine status or social activity Hong Kong people's lifestyle, consumer choices, social class and their standards of dwelling do not equate in a way expected in the West - as for example, analysed by sociologists such as Bourdieu. Families granted low-income housing, at subsidised rental, will often find their income level increases once family members start working but, as we saw in Chapter 4, they may not make it a consideration to look for alternative housing or more space since this will invariably mean a higher outlay. Other families might prefer to invest in property overseas with a view to emigration while retaining their public housing home as a local
base. It is generally recognised that even the most impressive looking young professionals may live in crowded homes. While lifestyle may be conducted largely outside of the home, private home life is an equally valid manifestation of self. Yet this private, internalised world of home is rarely acknowledged and rarely examined either as a legitimate space or as a reflection of the Hong Kong lifestyle.

Interpreting Hong Kong Domestic Space

Any attempt to narrate the Hong Kong domestic space presents the author with various problems. Who is narrating? What voices are being suppressed? There is the obvious difference between how I might define a Hong Kong space, inhabited by Hong Kong people compared with what cultural insiders see as a ordinary place inhabited by people much like themselves.¹ The same space may be perceived by residents to be a taken-for-granted world and simultaneously, to cultural insiders like myself, as an unfamiliar setting within a familiar concept of home.

The individual identifies, and at the same time judges, people/space/objects to be ordinary because they are familiar with this in their experience of habitus, as something shared within their social group. Yet, even within the broad representative strata of the physical habitus there are subtle classifications with different levels of ordinariness. It is a broad range of people who might see themselves as being ordinary, they may share the same habitus but their construction of it is unique. As Bourdieu points out, in practice “people’s image of this classification is a function of their position within it.”² Therefore, if there can be no absolute interpretation of what is ordinary then we might assume that this divergence is a virtue of the group.

One issue that needs to be addressed is not with the space per se, but how to respond to its multiple interpretations. This brings us back to the fundamental problem of how we see and how we judge what we see. As Miller³ suggests, central to the way in which the problem or the object is viewed, and the language through which it is represented, is the

When asked to describe the Estate as succinctly as possible the most common expression was: "A place where ordinary families live."
way in which it is framed. In recognising that the object’s extreme visibility and extreme invisibility exists simultaneously, Miller claims the visibility affects our ability to appreciate the deeper social properties of the object. He contends that the inherent visibility of the object is distracting, since it is not merely a form that occupies space, but an object that, subconsciously, represents the social habitus. It exists as a surface layer of the habitus so that contradicting and competing views of the same space can co-exist.

In the course of the research interviews I became conscious of how the individual’s ability to frame the problem was affected by their way of seeing the world. For example, after my research assistant Phoebe and I visited each home we could both describe the space but might emphasise different things. I would comment on the oddities in scale, the oversized television and little stools or the arrangement of lucky mottoes - which she would not have noticed. She would point out the piano and rocking chair which to her were bulky Western style objects, and incongruous signs of social mobility. In a plan drawing our representation of the space would be the same, yet through photography the representation would be quite different. The things that stood out to each of us within the space were those things we saw as being different from what we expected to see.

As a cultural insider, Phoebe would make observations that were different from her own dwelling experience, yet could not clearly see those things that were familiar to her from her own experience of Hong Kong domestic space. While I lacked the insider's local knowledge and understanding of dwelling practices I automatically responded to these homes as being peculiar to Hong Kong. This co-existence of contradicting and competing interpretations of space should not be suppressed. There are different voices with legitimate views of space all saying and seeing different things and clearly it should be a virtue of the way this interpretation is framed that will allow these variations to come through.

After conducting a pilot study I concentrated on long-term inhabitants living in the older housing types: Slab, H-Block, Linear and Twin Tower, which still account for the greatest number of units in the HKHA housing stock. I wanted to look more closely at how these residents responded to, and perceived, density. My research assistant, Phoebe, and I visited fifteen families who we encouraged to talk about their homespaces through an open-ended qualitative interview.

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1 The majority of homes in the main study were one “room” with the kitchen on the balcony next to the bathroom. There were some variations and the two biggest flats had ready-partitioned bedrooms.
This thesis initially set out to investigate space utilisation, to identify methods of designing space but, it became clear that the method of data collection, through an open-ended interview revealed more about spatial representation than utilisation. Tenants were using the interview to explain how they appropriated space as home, not just how they utilised or occupied it as space. They talked about their homes in terms of what that space meant to them. In response to this the data analysis shifted from the visible content of spatial representation to question the deeper knowledge surfacing within the richness of the data itself. This knowledge can only come from the residents although they might not be able to articulate design thinking as an everyday knowledge of the space. Rather than studying the physical evidence I became drawn to the interpretation of incidentals, and feelings about space. My interpretation was based less on what I saw and more on my sense of what they did not say. As Miller points out our unconscious reading of space, and the habitus, is often revealed in non-verbal clues.

In common with Langer, Bourdieu stresses the relationship of this object world to feelings rather than language; it is those expressions of disgust, distaste, and discomfort which best express our sense of something being 'wrong'. It is a world where the grimace is often more eloquent than the phrase.

Unlike public spaces, in domestic space we look for, and expect, a direct relationship between the space and the residents. This tends to soften our criticality, our interpretation and the language and terms we use to describe it. Miller\(^5\) points out that the complexity of absorbing the social implications of furnishings not only affects our reading of the space but also how we relate to the dialogue that takes place within the space where, he claims, “unconscious non-linguistic processes may act to control conscious and linguistic articulation”. In other words, the respondent's relationship with the space directly affects their articulation of space and what that space means to them.

Residents' use of language can unconsciously reflect the residents' past experience and is a vital link to the way they articulate their knowledge of space. I knew that I wanted to use the residents' own voice to maintain the freshness of the narrative of the interview\(^7\). The language barrier clearly prevented any direct verbal interaction between myself and

\(^5\) Daniel Miller, \textit{op. cit.}, p.105
\(^6\) \textit{Ibid.}, p. 102
\(^7\) See Chapter 3 Literature review note the Mass Observation Studies
respondents. However, my research assistant and I went over every translation in great detail to achieve a transcript that we both felt was an accurate representation of the interview.

At times it was difficult to interpret the nuances of expression from the interview especially where the respondents had been vague, non-committal or confused. Phoebe and I found ourselves discussing this in depth to ascertain what they might have meant to say, and how this related to their experience of the space.

In Hong Kong, an inch of space is worth a thousand pieces of gold.

This phrase surfaced in many interviews. It was a commonly used saying that appears to reflect a deeply held fatalistic view about the lack of space in Hong Kong. In this context the speaker was expressing his/her belief in the prohibitive cost of space and his/her acceptance that any amount of space in Hong Kong should be valued. It is significant that it was mainly the older residents who drew from a repertoire of Chinese sayings to make their point. That is, those who were more likely have a more traditional education, who clearly believed in these sayings and lived with these lessons firmly embedded in their outlook of life. By contrast, younger people were certainly familiar with these sayings but they were not used as part of their everyday language and presumably did not feature strongly in the way they lived. This aspect of language between generations is clearly outside my own expertise and this thesis. It is clear, however, that each speaker will frame their responses and method of expression in a particular manner according to range of their experience.

It was not easy to find people who would agree to be interviewed. The idea of inviting strangers into your home to ask questions is an intrusion most people could do without. This suggests that the people who agreed to be interviewed were curious about the research. It is reasonable to assume that we had their co-operation and that they would answer to the questions to the best of their ability. Several of the families we interviewed

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8 Phoebe conducted and transcribed the interviews. These were subsequently translated by a translator and then thoroughly re-worked by Phoebe and myself to pick up on any nuances within the text. See Appendix II.

9 Sampling was through personal contacts, snowballed contacts, and through community workers.

10 One woman turned me down at the door on the grounds that her son thought the introductory letter written on Polytechnic stationary made the visit "too official".

11 We did not ask people why they agreed to be interviewed but it is possible it had some sort of novelty value and sounded like an interesting thing to do. Some agreed as a personal favour through my Research Assistant's contacts.
had contravened the tenancy registration, yet surprisingly still agreed to be interviewed. These practices, of course, go on more than is officially recognised or can ever be fully substantiated and remind us that not all HKHA families are necessarily economically disadvantaged and that however carefully the HKHA statistics are compiled, they can never give a completely accurate account of the real situation. Chinese people are said to be reserved and dislike talking about themselves to other people. Hong Kong people in general have been found to be reluctant interviewees. They like to keep themselves to themselves and are said to be highly suspicious that an interviewer may be a Government representative in disguise, with a hidden agenda. By contrast, the same study found that public housing tenants were relatively easy to interview, mainly because as tenants, they are used to the intervention of housing managers and have more contact with official questionnaires than independent private housing tenants.

This was probably the first time these families had ever entertained a foreigner in their home. I could sense bemusement that a Polytechnic lecturer, an “educated person” would be interested in something they considered to be commonplace. In several of the interviews residents used this opportunity to ask if there was a better way of organising space or whether I felt they had done it wrong?

You’re design professionals. What do you think? Is there anything wrong? Please don’t hesitate to comment. We can do what you say!

It was clear that the respondents felt that the interview should not be one-sided. Frankly, I did not have an instant answer to the problem. I was still trying to figure out how to relate

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12 Home 3 had a married daughter and her family living with them who were not on the tenancy registration. Another family who had just recently moved in to a new flat were claiming for a grandparent who was living elsewhere.

13 Lately, the problem of well off tenants living in public housing has attracted a great deal of attention. When squatters were originally re-housed many of them were comparatively well off, yet there was no screening or means test at that time, and all squatters were treated equally. Currently there are restrictions on application procedures to ensure tenants are needy. However as Lau Kwok-yu points out “two-thirds of public housing tenants have never been means tested because they were affected by clearances.” Tenants are allowed the security of having one child to succeed the tenancy without being means tested. After 10 years in Public Housing, well-off tenants are requested to pay 1 1/2 to 2 times normal rent depending on their household income. Source: Eastern Express, November 2, 1994 It was revealed, after a 12 month probe targeted at some 2,250 families, that 500 tenants have been discovered sub-letting their flats. This was instigated after an earlier survey revealed “one in eight of its 660,000 tenants owned private apartments elsewhere, and that some owned as many as five units.” Eastern Express, September 17, 1995


15 Tenants are subject to the rules set by the HKHA which are supposedly monitored by the housing manager.

16 Home 5
to the space. Several families referred openly to design throughout the interview and were able to explain in detail their problem-solving techniques. While these are excellent responses it appeared as if they were trying too hard to oblige us with a good answer, to give us what they thought we wanted to hear and to be as helpful as they could. For most respondents their thinking was more often explained when they could not understand a question, or when they could not see subtle differences between questions.

Giddens tells us that much empirical research has failed to recognise the "discursive phenomena" of agents' knowledgeability. Their manner, or expression indicates there is meaning in what they do and do not say and how they behave. When residents had difficulty answering, expressing and stating what to them was obvious it might be because they felt that what they had to say was important enough to be articulated. This kind of data is central, rather than peripheral, to the articulation of their hidden knowledge and is implicit in the interview performance rather than in the language itself.

After each interview, my research assistant and I appeared to leave with much the same impression of the family - whether they seemed to be warm and close-knit or if they were tense and cautious. The interview was a tiny glimpse into their lives but we were conscious that an interview in situ, where the interviewer directs the conversation and questions, sets up a temporary artificial situation. Most families offered us tea and made us feel welcome. In some households we had the total attention of everyone present, whereas in others the television was on, children were doing their homework, the father was reading the paper or the mother pottered about in the kitchen, seemingly unconcerned with the proceedings. This did not appear to indicate we were any less welcome. We were guests in their home but to some extent we were intruding and they tolerated our presence for as long as courtesy, and their boredom threshold prevailed. However, I am conscious that my interpretation of the space is affected by my impression of the family, reinforced by what they said the transcripts and how they appeared throughout the interview.


Goffman shows how whenever an individual appears before others they will "have many motives for trying to control the impression they receive of the situation". In fact this works both ways, as I was also conscious how they would receive me. The "performance" of the interview was recursive, not just how they responded to us, but also how we responded to them, to help them feel more relaxed with this situation.

19 The time that suited most residents was a weekend morning.
20 Each interview generally lasted 45 minutes to one hour.
The respondents in the family turned out to be whoever was interested to speak, or felt they had something to say on the matter, usually the parents. In families with young children the parents had total control over the spatial organisation. In grown up families decision-making was often more democratic with younger family members joining in, assisting parents, or taking over the interview completely if the parents became lost for an answer. Grown-up children, assumed control of the organisation of the home, if no-one else would or if they felt they could do a better job than their parents. As income earners who were likely to be educated to a higher standard than their parents, they appeared to be more conscious of what they liked and disliked and of being in a position to do something about it. They were generally disposed to spend money to improve the look and order of the home which they expressed in different terms from their parents.

For long-term residents the memory of home is part of the rich experience and knowledge of the day to day living where time is blurred, punctuated by notable events. Their responses often strayed across different times of dwelling: the memory of where they used to live, what is was like when they first moved in, when they bought the television, when grandfather died or when the whole family comes over for Chinese New Year.

It was confusing at first when inconsistencies appeared in an interview, but this suggests that an individual can hold several different views of seeing their homespace. One family, for example, complained bitterly about the crowded conditions, yet they loved living there.

...But now, here it's obviously too small for us to live here. Six of us and just...four hundred (square) feet. When they come back, there's not even enough places to sit down. You can imagine, six, all six are adults. Look at them, they're all big guys, you see? Wouldn't they bump into each other when they come back... if only one or two people are at home, it's comfortable enough, But what about all six?

21 After the pilot study I realised there was a difference in the way different generations responded to the questions. I requested for the main study that wherever possible there should be family members from different generations present.

22 In all of the families the adult children had attained a higher level of education than their parents.

23 Janet Salaff, Working Daughters in the Hong Kong Chinese Family: Filial Piety or a Power in the Family? Morningside edition, New York: Columbia University Press, 1995. Salaff found that in families headed by a mother, working daughters were important breadwinners, were in a position to assume responsibility for major decisions regarding the household since the mother may be poorly educated and reluctant to take responsibility. In her survey the eldest daughters, who were important breadwinners in all four families, were involved in selecting the new housing and its furnishings. In one study the "father" was so obstinate about his position that he never consulted anyone else in the purchase of consumer gods. The daughter was amused when the father's purchase of a television turned out to be a "lemon".
I really love this flat... the kitchen is spacious. Where could you buy a new flat with as big a kitchen as this? Frankly, even a new flat built beside a main street and worth one million ten thousand or above, four hundred (square) feet or more, its kitchen is... very small, half the size of ours... On second thoughts, this flat is so good. So why should I bother to buy a new flat? In short, all you need is to be able to live peacefully and happily.

This respondent was conscious of feeling crowded, at the same time she was aware of the value and the qualities of her public housing home compared to her conception of an equivalent space in the private sector. She evaluated her home within the context of Hong Kong space and saw it as a good place to live. She was aware of the good and bad points of living there but according to her wider knowledge of Hong Kong space she was relatively satisfied.

The ability of people to talk about their home seems to relate to how much they contributed to the organisation of the space: whether their role was passive or active; how much they had thought about it at some time as a space solving, or aesthetic exercise and how much their home actually mattered to them. Those who had involved themselves with remodelling and organising the home were interested to talk about what they had done since they viewed it a serious and worthwhile subject. For different family members there is clearly a different experience and level of engagement with the homspace. Miller draws a link between the lack of decorative treatment and people who seemed lonely, depressed and isolated, in contrast with the treatment of the home as a creative activity as "a strong signifier of an active social involvement." From my own experience, the respondents who appeared to be least engaged with the space (Home 3) did not exhibit any of these symptoms. They were a big, closely-knit family who also appeared to be involved with their neighbours. Their lack of interest in the home therefore did not appear to reflect a lack of interest in each other.

Day to day maintenance of the home generally fell to the mother, especially if she was a housewife. Strong-minded females, especially younger women, would take charge of all the decisions associated with the household. The male head of the household was actively involved with organising the space if he was (a) good with his hands (b) interested in spatial problems (c) had contacts in the trade, or (d) if a major re-think of the space was going to be expensive.

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24 Home 2
26 Roderick J. Lawrence, "Domestic Space and Society" in Comparative Studies in Society and History, vol. 24, part 1, Jan. pp. 104-130, 1982. In this comparative study between households in Australia and England, Lawrence found that apart from repairing and painting, men were not involved with
Most families claimed that major decisions affecting the space were usually a result of a family discussion, especially if the children were grown-up.27

(re)Presenting the Home

First impressions are important. A well maintained home seems to reflect a family who is in tune with their surroundings. An untidy home reinforces preconceptions of a family overwhelmed by density. For apparent chaos and disorder it is tempting to read a family which cannot cope, or has given up, or do not care.28 These images undoubtedly make for more sensational images of density than a neat and tidy home. The interviews were pre-arranged. It is therefore likely that families, conscious that they were entertaining strangers in their home, might put on a front to present themselves and their home in the best possible light. If they tidied up specially it was because it mattered to them that we would see it that way; if they left it untidy it was because they did not care, or were incapable of doing much about it. Each of the homes was presented to us in a state the families were comfortable for us to see. By controlling the setting for the interview, the family could feel more relaxed with our presence. If caught off-guard it is possible they might not have been so comfortable or responsive.29

Behind the lens of camera it is easy to forget this is not just any space but someone's home. In an interview, the family could control and watch what they said but it is not so easy for them to have the same degree of control over what the photographer sees and

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27 Fai-ming Wong, “Effects of the Employment of Mothers on Marital Role and Power Differentiation in Hong Kong” in Ambrose Y.C.King & Rance P.L. Lee (eds.) op. cit., In this survey he found that full-time housewives played a more important role in deciding household matters compared to women in full-time employment. Some women took total control of household affairs, but in no cases did he find an all-powerful autocratic father.


In their research into cultural inventory of Indian families the Colliers posed the question “How can you tell an Indian family (Native American) lives here? The answer to this question, combined with additional attention to the character of “order”, proved to be a reliable means of judging the degree to which the family was successfully handling their life in the new setting. Disorder, in close association with a low level of expression of Indian identity, was consistently found in homes of families who were failing to cope with relocation.”

29 It is unlikely that families could re-arrange fixed furniture especially for the visit since there would be nowhere they could put it. If they did tidy up it might involve arranging folding furniture, campbeds, tables and chairs against the wall or stacking loose stools, items not in use at the time of the visit. The basic layout would not be altered.
shoots to represent the home. Clearly, the photographer is required to be responsible in
the way he/she chooses to represent a space that is a home. Any visual image taken by an
outsider is thus more representative of what the photographer sees, and chooses to show
rather than how the residents actually see it.

I am conscious, as a cultural outsider, how a visual message of Hong Kong dwellings will
be interpreted by other cultural outsiders who have no other knowledge of this form of
dwelling. These images of density are received in very different ways by cultural
outsiders and insiders. What appears to surprise most Westerners is how so many people
and things can be packed into one small open plan space and how they are able to read
this space as a Hong Kong home since it is so different from their own cultural and spatial
experience of home. To cultural insiders the image is not so shocking, it is more familiar
though not necessarily typical of their own experience, yet as an image it conveys a
message of density, which they may not have consciously considered before, in terms of a
Hong Kong lifestyle.

It is easy to sensationalise density without recognising that it comes in various forms.
Home 8, (Plate 19) for example, reads as a problematic crowded space. It is difficult to
read these crowded conditions as a legitimate homespace and it reinforces the concept of
density as a problematic and substandard dwelling. However, cultural outsiders appear
to have more difficulty relating to Home 9. (Plate 20) This family do not appear to be
overwhelmed by density and it appears to be a normal home, albeit condensed. Two
children are doing their homework on small folding tables, another is lying on the
parents' bed playing with a computer game. The mother, aunt and grandmother are
casually sitting on the floor, where it is cooler. In Home 9 it is the shock of normality in
density that contrasts with the assumptions normally made about density.

Common Sense

If we are to look for underlying, invisible methods of coping with density we may need to
consider aspects of the daily life, lifestyle and culture. As Lee\(^6\) has observed many of the
mechanisms for coping with density are unconsciously part of Hong Kong everyday life.
In every aspect of their daily life Hong Kong people have adapted to Hong Kong density

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\(^6\) Rance P.L. Lee " High-Density effects in Urban Areas: What Do We Know and What Should We Do?" in Ambrose Y.C. King & Rance P.L. Lee (eds.) op. cit.
which is reinforced as a way of life. Space saving techniques in domestic practices relate to an overall consciousness of density within the Hong Kong lifestyle with, for example, the double school system\textsuperscript{31}, illegal extensions, dining out and crowded shopping malls.

There are social-cultural mechanisms other than those suggested by Ward and Anderson, such as the time-scheduling of activities, the cultural habit of using the same space for multiple purposes...the popular use of compact furniture in the households...the first-come-first-served principle in public service, the cultural acceptance of a relatively close spatial distance between individuals, the custom of entertaining friends in restaurants rather than homes, the establishment of hourly-rate hotels for couples or lovers to make love, and the popularization of "space intensive" games (e.g. mahjong in Hong Kong and pachinko in Japan)\textsuperscript{32}

Lee's examples reflect how social and mental processes are part of the Hong Kong habitus which is embodied as a knowledge of the social world and as a practical knowledge of this world. This, Bourdieu claims, is constituted through a collective history acquired through personal history and used to create the social world of habitus. It is a knowledge, which the individual takes for granted and perceives as being a common-sense knowledge that is shared by society as a whole.

According to the anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, any common sense approach to spatial organisation must be culturally-specific. Common sense is "the hard core of general knowledge of all cultures"\textsuperscript{33}. It is a knowledge specific to the culture, the acquisition of which he describes thus:

There is no esoteric knowledge, no special technique or peculiar giftedness, and little or no specialized training - only what we rather redundantly call experience and rather mysteriously call maturity involved. Common sense, to put it another way, represents the world as a familiar world, one everyone can, recognize, and within which everyone stands, or should on his own feet.\textsuperscript{34}

A common sense attitude towards space is not based on a universal logic but what makes sense within the particular cultural application of space. In Hong Kong, density is likely to

\textsuperscript{31} Many primary schools operate on a double school system sharing the same premises but where the a.m. school is quite separate in administration and staff from the p.m. school
\textsuperscript{32} Rance P.L. Lee "High-Density effects in Urban Areas: What Do We Know and What Should We Do?" in Ambrose Y.C. King & Rance P.L. Lee (eds.) op. cit. p.14
\textsuperscript{34} Clifford Geertz, Common Sense as a Cultural System, Local Knowledge: Further Essays In Interpretive Anthropology, New York: Basic Books, 1983, p. 91
be viewed as less of a spatial limitation for those who see it as the spatial norm. In Home 12 for example, the respondent was able to clearly articulate how she first approached the problem of arranging the space.

I considered the old furniture first. Then I considered how to put all of them close to the wall so that a space was left in the middle...Take it slow, think it clear, say ...to visualise. Try to decide what you want and whether or not to call in a man to make furniture.35

That common sense is the root of practical problem solving seems an obvious, and not very glamorous proposition. Common sense knowledge of space is based on experience of space, of knowing what will work and what seems to look right, or wrong, to fit with a conception of how domestic space should be.

When I need a piece of furniture I confine myself to the place where it's needed. I bought this before I'd partitioned the room. If I discarded it and bought a smaller one, I would have no place to put my stuff and clothes. If I made more hanging cabinets in the room, it would be too ugly and stuffy.16

It is likely that residents will adopt familiar spatial conventions to create a design solution that suits their needs and will fit within the space. Common sense happily sets a logic to deal with the pragmatics of problem-solving. It helps set the parameters of the problem, yet does not remove choice.

They're my ideas!... Take that cabinet for example, I bought it because my children had all grown up and I couldn't find another place to put clothes. I thought it out where I should put it and I had to be careful that it wouldn't block the air from the air-conditioner. Just like that...I do it when I think I need to.37

It may not be difficult for residents to find an appropriate solution since the habitus, and a common floor plan, already shapes the access to the range of solutions. Common sense knowledge helps people to make basic judgements about what seems to be the most practical and obvious solution - or, the least impractical or problematic. Unlike a designer, who continually seeks to invent and find new ways of interpreting problems, residents do not re-examine their customary domestic practices and spatial configurations. The range of ideas are shaped by habitus, know-how, and by what the see as familiar and appropriate.

35 Home 12
36 Home 4
37 Home 10
Residents were not always clear about the source of their design ideas which appears to reflect on their perception of design, and spatial order, as everyday knowledge. Ideas, therefore, might be thought of as common knowledge based on what they have noticed in neighbours’ homes, what they have seen in shops, restaurants, or on television. Their judgement of what constitutes a good idea may be set by comparing results with neighbours within the habitus, for perceived successes or failures.

Sometimes I feel that our arrangement or decoration is worse than others. Some flats are well decorated... perhaps when they decorated the flat, they made a better job. When we moved here, we thought that we needed the basic things only. But some decorated it beautifully. The balcony, the kitchen, and the toilets alike. Some are really superb. Maybe it’s because they’re partitioning is better. 

Spatial design thinking, as these tenants see it, does not refer to a grand plan but rather a practical approach to the problem based on what makes sense in the space at that time. Residents articulated this not as an acquired knowledge but as common sense which, based on past experience they knew would work, a “method” that everybody uses or, “...a practical way so that things would not be awkward...”.

One resident explained that the space was arranged “not by our will but by the environment...”. The end result was not exactly what he ideally would have liked, but was, he felt, the best solution given the specific limitations.

First we wanted a well-ventilated flat and brightness too. But the environment didn’t allow us to do so. Then the kids grew up. It was their request to partition the bedroom. After the bedroom was partitioned, of course we felt that it was better without the bedroom because it was brighter without the partition and more space was available. It was OK when the kids were small. Now they’ve grown up. It’s inconvenient without a bedroom. So we weighed the gains and losses and gave in a little to the kids...

Common sense is a broad concept masking a complexity of thinking and depth of knowledge. As Schön points out, if our knowing is ordinarily tacit in our actions, much of what we see as being common sense is, in practice, about knowing-in-action and often we cannot say what it is we know. “Know-how” or to know how to do something might appear to be a common and tacit knowledge but ultimately the degree of know-how relates to a knowledge from practice, to knowing-in-action. Common sense might not be

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* Home 10  
* Home 4  
exactly how the residents experienced the actual design process, but rather how they articulated a reflection of this process to others. Some residents took this knowledge so much for granted they were not aware of it as knowledge. When residents responded in pragmatic terms to what was directed as a probing question about design this can be seen as a legitimate expression of their view and knowledge of space. In this way, rather than looking for residents to articulate a deeper knowledge interpreted as a design method, it is perhaps appropriate to accept the reality of spatial knowledge as common sense knowledge.

Before I began this research I had not foreseen that each interview would offer such a different interpretation. This had a lot to do with the personality of the family. Garrulous informants seemed to enjoy talking about their homes. These respondents were ideal qualitative respondents. They appeared relaxed and open, and though they digressed from the questions they provided useful anecdotal data and lively descriptions of their home and homelife. Respondents often appeared to be thinking aloud, others were more direct. Family members often contradicted each other, or there was friendly sparring and glimpses family repartee. In all this there were different perceptions of space hidden by layers of knowledge, practice and indeed design. It is therefore appropriate to acknowledge this diversity, to allow these voices to come through, to supplement my own interpretation of space.

But if respondents cannot always articulate spatial knowledge how are these norms absorbed? Schön's outline of the different properties of knowing and knowing-in-action suggests how this might occur.

There are actions, recognitions, and judgements which we know how to carry out spontaneously; we do not have to think about them prior to or during their performance. We are often unaware of having learned to do these things; we simply find ourselves doing them. In some cases, we were once aware of the understandings which were subsequently internalized in our feeling for the stuff of action. In other cases, we may never have been aware of them. In both cases, however, we are usually unable to describe the knowing which our action reveals. °

Geertz points out there are differences in the way common sense, as a cultural system, is understood, reinforced and applied within a culture. If common sense can be questioned, and taught it can be assumed that the immediacies of experience will be directly affected by social and spatial developments of dwelling. As the social habitus changes common

° Ibid., p. 54
sense knowledge is likely to be affected by exposure to the formalised knowledge of education, cultural exchange and through the media. Therefore, what residents are able to articulate as a common sense method of spatial appropriation represents a greater depth of knowledge than they themselves might credit.
CHAPTER 5

APPROPRIATING SPACE
Spatial Conceptions

As a cultural outsider I am constantly amazed how Hong Kong people can walk into a room and swiftly estimate the floor area. However, residents' familiarity with the cost of private space created some confusion in their minds about the method of calculating the square foot layout in public housing - whether the HKHA counted the corridor or balcony and whether or not the thickness of the walls was included - some knew, others assumed it was so, others had no idea.¹ One family commented there was no need to measure the space since this was not a private space and it was not costed by the square foot. Most tenants were able to state the official size of the flat but many had their own (smaller) estimate for the useable floor area based on the fact that each vinyl floor tile equalled one foot. A rough estimate to be sure, but one that struck them as being more accurate, since they had worked it out for themselves. One might also infer they were inclined to believe that the figure they were given was exaggerated.

I vaguely remember the Government told us it was three hundred and something when we moved in. But we guessed it was more like two hundred feet or something like that.²

Parents were able to recall how spacious and empty the flat looked when they first saw it. The clarity of this memory indicates the enduring strength of the first impression of the space. As new tenants they still remembered a great relief moving to a place of their own that was self-contained new, safe and affordable. The move gave them a sense that their lives had significantly improved.

At that time when we came here, there wasn’t too much stuff here...it was spacious. It was good of course. As we had no place to live, where could we find a flat like this to live? In the past, we just had part of what we have now and several people living together, see? We slept on the floor, we had to. If they allocated a flat to you, you were lucky.³

The offer of a HKHA flat represented more than just a space to live; it offered security, stability and a sense that the Government cared. Residents knew they would never have been able to afford to live anywhere as big as this if they were not in the public housing programme.

¹ Private domestic space is normally calculated as gross space which includes part of the corridor or lift landing and staircase, lobby and often the outside area of the flat, from the external edge of the window.
² Pilot Study 2
³ Home 7
To be frank, our living area is bigger. At that time it was about several ten (square feet) but now we have more than two hundred (square) feet, including a private kitchen, a toilet and so forth. We cooked beside the main door at that time, The toilet was in the middle of the floor. So...it's really improved a lot.

To further probe their conception of dwelling space residents were asked to describe their ideal home. I was informed that other studies found that residents would not be able to answer this question. But I felt that if this question were deliberately left open it would reveal something about the way residents conceived of domestic space. They could have based their response on any kind of dream home from magazines, media, or overseas travels yet the majority answered from a pragmatic view. "Well you know the living environment of Hong Kong."

Some admitted they had never thought about this question before. Their response appeared to be derived from two factors. First, from a present social and economic position they held very strong views that more space indicates more rent and secondly that their present home was better than where they lived before which, in their view, made it acceptable in Hong Kong terms. Interestingly, most expressed their concept of an ideal space in proportion to their current home.

"It should be wider than this and should have more space to use.....I would like to have three hundred square feet...yes, that'd content me...but this flat is not bad..."

One mother declared "Three hundred or more, like this one, is good enough..." This statement was qualified by her daughter who explained that a smaller flat would give her mother less space to clean. Drawing from a more abstract spatial sense the mother in Home 8 observed:

Figures, it's hard to say...it's just like a purse. The more money you have the bigger the purse you'll get..."

Responses appeared to be based on flat sizes with which they were familiar: from their own block, Homeownership Scheme flats, or the new style public housing blocks. This gives some indication that they still envisioned their ideal home would be within the public housing programme.

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1 Home 8
2 For example, answers ranged from; 'half as much again" From 380 to 500 sq. feet, From 300 to 400 sq. feet From 200 to 400 sq. feet.
3 Home 12
4 Home 8
Others conceived of space in terms of rooms. Young adult family members especially, expressed a strong desire to have rooms of their own: a place where they could close a door to have a moment of quietness. Somewhere they could be alone: "It doesn't have to be very big as long as it belongs to me." As one son, explained:

About six hundred square feet ...I hope. The most important point is the area only plays a minor role, it has its importance but it's not that important. I hope I can have a very independent, I mean a clear boundary of partition. That is, I want independence, on my own. Or, a room for my parents, a room for me, I hope I can sometimes live together and at some other times, we can live independently. I can do something private......I can have a room for myself.'

Similarly, one young mother, was tentative as she wished for a two bedroom home. "I don't want to be greedy". She envisioned a home with a separate room of her three daughters so she would not be so frustrated by their untidiness. One son, joked that his ideal home should be thousand square feet, two storey building with a garden. In Western terms this might sound a perfectly reasonable, indeed, modest concept of an ideal, but in Hong Kong the very idea of it highly amused the other family members.

Residents talked about their home today as quite a different space from the space as they remembered it. As Lefebvre notes, time is intrinsically part of the lived experience, concealed in space.

Our time, then, this most essential part of lived experience, this greatest good of all goods, is no longer visible to us, no longer intelligible. It cannot be constructed. It is consumed, exhausted, and that is all. It leaves no traces. It is concealed in space...

Throughout the interview residents made constant shifts between past and present, referring to space by association with individual and collective memories and lifestories within that space. Asking long-term residents to reflect on their home forces them to try to recall their values and priorities, which Bachelard describes as a “thread of a narrative” where real and virtual experiences are blurred in time.

He experiences the house in its reality and its virtuality, by means of thought and dreams. It is no longer in its positive aspects that the house is really “lived”, nor is it only on the passing hour that we recognise its benefits. An entire past comes to dwell in a new house ....Thus the house is

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1 Home 2
2 Home 1
not experienced from day to day only, on the thread of a narrative, or in
the telling of our own story. Through dreams, the various dwelling-places
in our lives co-penetrate and react in the treasures of former days.

As time passed residents became more accustomed to the space and started to feel the
density more than before. It seemed to be more crowded. This might not just have been
their imagination. As they became more settled they would have accumulated possessions
and furniture and the children would have grown.

......At that time, the HA persuaded us to live here and told us that if we
found it not enough, we can apply for a bigger one. But now when we
really want to apply for it, they say...it's impossible and so forth.

As Government tenants they were aware of their own situation compared with others in
the programme and appeared to be familiar with their rights as tenants. Most of all, they
felt that density in Hong Kong was a fact of life, that the density in their home was fairly
typical for Hong Kong, and there was nothing they or anyone else, could do anything
about. When asked whether he felt this flat was big enough for five people (formerly
seven people) the father in Home 4 replied.

Of course not! Right? Y'know in Hong Kong, an inch of land is worth a
thousand pieces of gold. If you hire a flat of about two hundred square
feet...Even a small flat with a single room and a living room will cost you
several thousand dollars let alone a flat of two hundred square feet...We
have no choice. The reason is, after we'd moved into this estate, we found
the rent was many times cheaper than private housing. If we lived in
private housing we would not have as much space as this.....

The same sentiment was reiterated by another tenant:

Crowded of course! Four people living in such a tiny place. No fixed
rooms. Unfolding the screen, I am in bed. Where're the rooms?... We eat
here, we live here, we sleep here. We fall short of the best but are better
than the worst, aren't we?

And yet this family of four once had four guests to stay in their 280 sq. feet home. During
the festivals they frequently had 20 people over, with two tables of mahjong, although
"they mostly stand up and stand still".

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12 Home 7
13 Pilot Study 2
Younger tenants, although similarly resigned to living within the HKHA system, were more critical of public housing standards. They felt they were not just living in high density but in a poorly designed space with low quality of finishes - which they saw as being typical of Government standard housing. One daughter, who had recently moved back into the family home after her brother died, was quite clear about the quality of space that "we Hong Kong people" had become used to.

"We eat here, and the TV is just beside. Our noses can almost touch the screen. Generally, we accept it. We Hong Kong people are accustomed to small space. I guess everyone would say the same. Frankly, some people say they have enough space because there was nothing to compare it to. Now, there is. The new public housing estates are different from our old estates like ours. The smallest flat for a family of four is actually big enough for all because they calculate it in terms of the area per person, including the kids..."

The casual reference to "we" collectively, all Hong Kong people, those with whom she believes she shares the same spatial experience, is a strong indication of her identification with the habitus. As standards in the design of the new blocks continue to be raised, younger residents have come to expect, and demand, better quality housing.

Concerning myself only with the space as I saw it at the interview would not reflect how the family talked about their home as a lived-in space. Residents referred to changes in the home according to events within their family cycle, seasons and the festive calendar; events that marked time. Decision making within a household is an ongoing process. Each decision is affected by those previously made and subsequently. Several households noted major revisions to the space organisation were prompted by the availability of more space when one or more of the children moved away or, if someone died.

The Lunar New Year is the most significant event in the Chinese calendar. Thus, every year throughout Hong Kong at this time there is a deep rooted cultural precedence for every Chinese family to clean their home inside and out. It is the one period within the

12 Home 12
16 Wilk refers to consumer research on decision processes within the household which focus on decision-making as an ongoing process in which the outcome of one decision affects the input to the next.
17 Traditionally the home should be cleaned on the 28th of the last month of the old Year but nowadays people will make sure that it is properly cleaned on or before the Lunar New Years Eve. The tradition is said to derive from the crop cycle, the quiet period between the harvest and the next sowing, allowing people more time to clean up their homes, make special foods and visit relatives.

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year when the home is expected to look its best. This is such a deep rooted tradition that even Chinese people who do not admit to practice any forms of folk religion, or are practising Christians, will normally enter into the cultural festivities by pasting up traditional lucky mottoes and decorating their home with symbolic festive flowers. If a family decides to re-decorate it is fixed in their minds that it should take place in time for the Lunar New Year. If they do not decorate they still might re-organise the flat or invest in a new piece of furniture. Co-incidentally, furniture shops throughout the Territory are filled to cater for this seasonal interest in the home. Residents will therefore be prompted to think more about their home when they go shopping in the lead up to the Lunar period.

Appropriating Space

The flats in this study generally comprised a rectangular plan with access from a central corridor. Ventilation and daylight enters the flat via a window opposite to the main door. Beyond this is the open balcony, used as a laundry and kitchen, adjacent to this is a small bathroom comprising a toilet and overhead shower. It is a purely internal space. Officially residents are not permitted to appropriate public space in the corridor but minor infringements are ignored: a doormat, Tudi, plants and slippers. In practice, however, in some estates residents might place their bulkier objects in the corridor to supplement space inside the home: bicycles, plants, shoe racks. On the window-side, families might appropriate the space outside the main window by erecting a plant holder, or attach basins, hose pipes, ladders and other household utilities to the front of the building.

It may be argued that the lack of inherent features in the flat layout gives residents more choice in the appropriation of internal space. However, in such a high density the configuration of the plan is a critical factor. The position of front door in relation to the corridor wall sets the main circulation. Tenants generally tried to keep this as free as

For the traditionalist this might extend to a new toothbrush and slippers and comb. Today it is normally only children who will have a completely new set of clothes.

These are: peach trees, pussy willows, chrysanthemum, peony and narcissus. Special flower markets take place over the Lunar New Year and it is traditional for people to visit these to buy some flowers for their home. Orange trees in pots are also very popular and might be kept until the following year. However since it is difficult to get these plants to produce fruit - according to the tradition the number of fruits are important to bring good fortune - people may throw them out after the festive period.

Housing Block types varied slightly: see Appendix 1. Old Slab, Double H, Single H, Twin Tower.

God of the Land. It may be in the form of a plaque, a simple tin container or a small wooden shrine.
possible as the route through the internal space to the balcony, towards the main source of
natural light.

New tenants were bound by tenancy rules and strict guidelines governing what
alterations they were permitted to make to the space. At handover the flat was in a rough
state. Tenants were required to treat the walls, install electricity sockets and lights and, in
some cases to install window grilles, plastic shutters and folding gates according to the
HKHA specification22.

Tenants relied heavily on authorised contractors22 available on site who they considered to
be knowledgeable about the HKHA specifications and could give advice to tenants on
partitioning and decorative finishes. The contractor was normally hired to install the
electricity sockets and light fittings to the HKHA standard.24 With hindsight the son in
Home 1 pointed out the advice given by contractors was, in his mind very basic. in those
days, he felt that tenants were happy to go along with what the contractor offered.

I feel that what the approved decorators.. contractors, can provide for us is
too basic. They just showed you, say the colour of the ceramic tiles.. helped
you to lay the floor or to paint the wall. There wasn't any further guidance
on decoration. Because at that time, people had fewer requirements than
now, so everybody...ninety percent of the people who moved here at about
the same time have a very similar internal decoration. 21

It may have been convenient, or less confusing, for tenants to go along with the
contractor's options, indeed, it might not have occurred to them that there might be a
range of other materials to choose from. The father in Home 10 reflected on his lack of
knowledge of decorating when they first moved in "we decorated the flat simply" "we
were green". The expense of decorating was a major factor for most families but decisions
made at this time were lasting, they would be unlikely to change from whitewash to
plaster once they had arranged the furniture. Twenty years ago it is probably true to say
people had fewer requirements in decorating than today and the aesthetics, or style of
decoration probably had low priority.

21 These would be more likely to be blocks with an external corridor, which might have less traffic
flow than blocks with an internal corridor.
22 In later blocks these items were supplied by the HKHA before tenants moved in.
23 The HKHA were forced to introduce a policy whereby only authorised contractors, or family
members, were allowed to carry out decorating works within the blocks. This was prompted by
complaints from homeowners that they were being intimidated by Triad related decorating
companies. These firms would charge occupants twice the market rate and would raise the price
half way through the job. See Eastern Express, August 24, 1995
24 Respondents complained that they felt hassled by the authorised contractors and, if they were
only required to do minor work they would deliberately keep the tenant waiting.
25 Home 1
Years later, residents still recalled the level of bureaucracy attached to applying for approval to make alterations, even if they only wanted to “hammer in a nail”. Not surprisingly they were deterred by the thought of all this bother and unwanted interference from management. Up to six months after people moved in, especially in brand new blocks, the management would check the state of the interior space for any infringement of these rules. Over time, however, the tenants perceived the HKHA were more relaxed “because they care about the new flats and forget about the old”. As they become more used to living in the flat, and under the management system they reasoned that if other residents had been given approval to make changes, they could take it upon themselves to do the same, without the bother of applying for official authorisation. “They will ask you many questions and tell you many rules”. Many of these major alterations would have been obvious from the outside but people seemed quite determined that, if they wanted to, they would, make changes to their homes, and the management would just have to live with it.

At first, they did not allow such work. Later, they didn’t say a word even when they noticed we’d done it. They ignored it day after day. If they want to remove it, it is up to them. However we will rebuild it. Besides, what can we do?

As tenants assumed more power over their homespace this coincided with a shift in the management’s protective concerns for the visual outlook of the older blocks towards a policy of general upkeep and upgrading. Today, the majority of public housing tenants have installed air conditioning, run a washing machine, refrigerator and countless other electrical goods. Most residents felt that no family could do without an air-conditioner today. One family pointed out, the high density meant that even where previously there had been a good air flow, tenants were forced to install a unit as they were affected by the level of heat generated by their neighbours’ units.

Don’t you know that every family has air-conditioners now? In the past, we didn’t have one. Since our flat has a wide view...it’s windy and well ventilated if we open the doors or windows. We even slept leaving the door or windows open, before. It was O.K. but in recent years, almost every family has installed air-conditioners. The flats above us and under us, the flats to our left and right, almost all flats have installed them.

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26 Home 7
27 Home 4 mentioned that the lower balustrade of the balcony which was designed with gaps to allow for ventilation was later sealed by the HKHA to make it more waterproof. Initially residents were not permitted to install air-conditioning until the electrics were upgraded to accommodate the increase in the use of appliances.
28 Those who keep caged birds must move them inside at night so they will not be affected by the hot air expelled from the air conditioner. Home 4 commented that he lost several birds this way in the past.
you walk outside, the wind will bring you the hot air from them. So I have to install it... It's impossible not to do.".

One of the most common alterations was the installation of aluminium windows replacing the basic plastic shutters\(^\text{30}\). (Plate 21) Many considered this to be a basic need rather than a luxury. On a wet or windy days the shutter boards reduced light, let rain in during storms, rattled noisily in windy weather and were inadequate, if not dangerous, in a typhoon. (Plate 22)

With little, or no post-occupancy knowledge, the HKHA continued to build flats to their original design. One of the most common alterations tenants made was to change the swing door from the kitchen to living room into a folding door. This was almost a standard alteration in every home that I visited. It suggests that HKHA tenants share a common sense of what works best and the practical knowledge of what is appropriate to high density space. As one tenant put it: “it was clumsy and took up too much space, it was inconvenient”. They found it awkward to continually push and pull a door in such a small space, which in practice was normally kept open.

Miller’s\(^\text{31}\) sample of a London Council estate identified three main strategies of appropriation, which he relates to the different states of alienation.

One was passive, in which alienation was interiorised as the futility of action and an inability to appropriate the material environment within which one lived. The second was an attempt to use aesthetic construction to impose as facade which as far as possible drew attention away from the fixtures and towards items directly chosen by or associated with the tenants. And finally, a critical point was reached where alien forms were themselves expelled or thoroughly transformed and replaced with either purchased or built constructions by the tenants. In such a situation it seemed that in practice such commodities were viewed as having a much greater potential for identification than items provided by the state.

Similarly, within this study, some families had considered carefully how they might make the best use the space, making cohesive alterations to lighting, decor fixtures and fittings. But there were also those who appeared to be passive and made little attempt to create an overall aesthetic. Other families over the years had gradually made improvements such as new windows, flooring and pieces of furniture; read as different layers in the space.

\(^{29}\) Home 10
\(^{30}\) According to Home 4 the approved style of aluminium windows should be sliding, not push/pull type and the glass should be clear, not tinted. From the outside it is plain to see that people have installed a variety of window types.

In the wake of bad publicity over the construction quality of some HKHA building structures tenants were more conscious that older blocks were substandard buildings - even those that were found to be unaffected by the structural problems. Understandably, residents did not wish to spend much money on a space they do not own or, which may some day, be demolished. In anticipation of moving to another flat, in the near and often distant future, they consciously restricted their efforts in improving their present flat.

Room for Space

According to Rapoport\textsuperscript{32} even in the most utilitarian environment the concept of basic needs involves value judgements and choice. Each culture has its own definition of what is a priority within a space. Therefore, the concept of what is comfortable in terms of space, temperature or density cannot be taken for granted as universal concepts. Hong Kong people have clearly adapted to density but how might this affect their method of appropriating domestic space?

Probably the most important decision tenants had to make concerning the layout of the flat was whether or not to partition a bedroom. In the west, this may be seen as a basic requirement for a domestic space\textsuperscript{33} but at this density this preference must be weighed up against other options and constraints. Here the suppressed voice of social norms and sexual taboos leaves many unanswered questions. Children may sleep with their parents when they are small but this practice is less becoming less common. Different sex siblings may share the same bunk bed (different bunks) where there is no alternative. Where there is no partition the only private place in this one-room space is the bathroom. One daughter joked when they were growing up they changed their clothes under the quilt, others commented on the inconvenience of having to change their clothes in the bathroom with clothes falling on the floor.

If the family decided they needed a room, and, presuming that they had enough space to do so, they would normally try to keep the partitioned space as small as possible so that it

\textsuperscript{32} Amos Rapoport, \textit{House, Form and Culture}, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-hall, 1969

\textsuperscript{33} Susan Kent, "Activity Areas and Architecture: An Interdisciplinary View of the Relationship Between use of Space and Domestic Built Environments" in Susan Kent (ed.) \textit{op., cit.}, p. 6

Kent cites Saegert's observation of governmental (US) regulations for public housing: "A single mother with a daughter gets one bedroom; with a son, she gets two." Clearly the Euroamerican society base is constructed around the spatial propriety of the incest taboo. One mother made the comment that she was glad she had two daughters since it made it easier for them to share one room, whereas a son would have made the open plan sleeping arrangements more difficult.
just surrounded the bed. The configuration of some flats did not allow sufficient space for residents to build a room. In PS1, for example, the main door was located off centre on the wall. As the tenant observed: “Even when we first moved in I knew it (floor plan) was not good...” If the door had been more to one side she would have been able to create a room. She also commented that it would be more space-saving if access to the toilet was from the balcony rather than the living-room (as in other flats) to save the extra circulation space required for two separate doors. These observations come directly from her experience of having to “adjust our life,” not to mention the placement of furniture, to the poorly designed layout.

Every family emphasised the need to have as much space as possible for the living area for when family members would be at home together and for moving about. Where residents partitioned a room it was designed essentially for privacy and sleeping. In order to gain privacy families had to sacrifice internal ventilation and light and to put up with the visual block created within the space.

Popular types of partitioning ranged from lightweight laminated boards in an aluminium frame, to the solid wooden panel construction. Home 7 screened off a sleeping area through the use of large wardrobes, PS2 utilised an ingenious device using folding screens to surround the bunkbeds. (Plate 23) The beds could be hidden away so that during the day the space had the appearance of a living room, with the illusion of two rooms behind. It was only when the screens were pulled back at night, exposing both bunkbeds that the actual density of the room could be seen. The father in this family had put a lot of thought into the problem of creating the most effective use of space. To further add to the illusion of an extended space he placed a wallpaper mural depicting a swimming pool diving board on the back of front door. This device, popular with families in the 1970’s, was more typically of forest or Alpine scenes and was used on a whole wall, to extend the “view”.

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* Home 1 had their bed custom-made just big enough to fit the parents, who were short, which meant they could have an extra few inches for the living area.

Tong found that 99% of respondents erected a partition to achieve privacy for sleeping and undressing. Wherever people expressed negative response to their flats they attributed to the fact they were unable to subdivide their flats satisfactorily.
Residents talked about placing the beds, as the bulkiest piece of furniture, in the space first and arranging everything else around this. The most popular type of bed was, of course, the space saving, ubiquitous bunk bed. Most families still had their original old metal bunkbeds. The lower bunk is supposedly a double but is only about six inches bigger than the top bunk. There is no sprung mattress, only a hard board with mattress placed on top which in summer will be covered in a bamboo mat to keep the occupant cool. Traditionally, by day the quilt will be rolled up. Younger people tend to prefer Western style bunk beds, or the more modern, high-density local style which may also incorporate a lower level that can be pulled out to accommodate a third person.

Beds were normally placed beside, or facing the main door, away from the window. This makes the bed(s) the first thing to be seen on entering the flat. A designer, assured of the importance not only of privacy but propriety, would normally avoid placing beds in an exposed position. At this density residents’ may have little choice. For a couple, the only form of visual privacy might be a curtain surrounding the bed as the most practical and convenient method of providing privacy in a tight space. (App.1. PS1:1)

Today, with the change in lifestyle even cultural insiders remark on the lack of privacy in these homes. Westerners usually refer to what they see as obvious sexual taboos. Home 4 lived comfortably for years without partitioning a bedroom. When the children grew up, two rooms were partitioned within the flat, at their request.

After the bedroom was partitioned, of course we felt that it was better without a bedroom because it was brighter without the partition and more space was available. It was OK when the kids were small. Now they’ve grown up. It’s inconvenient without a bedroom. So we weighed up the gains and losses and gave in a little to the kids.27

People distinguished between “using” and “wasting” space. They felt that spatial organisation required maximum use of space but, at the same time, if things were piled up “like skyscrapers” the space became too claustrophobic. This created a dilemma. They may have wanted the space to look more cohesive but often the amount of furniture they required within the space did not always allow for this. As one father explained:

27 Many families still had their original old metal framed bunk beds. The lower bunk is only about six inches bigger than the upper bunk: a small double. There is no sprung mattress, only a hard board with mattress on top which in summer will be covered by a rattan mat, to keep it cool. By day the quilt may be rolled up, the traditional way. Younger families tended to go for Western style bunks, or the more modern local style children’s bed with built in cupboards, shelves and lights, which may also incorporate a lower level that can be pulled out for a third person.

27 Home 4
We also try to think, of for example, what the advantages of this place are. Is there anything we can make use of? Well, we have arranged them like this. But is it good? Is it right? My personal view is that this (the position of the TV) is convenient for us (to watch). From the start... I should have placed it (the fridge) right so that here it'd be much better, and wider. Right? Then the TV should be turned to face this side. But now they’re more cohesive (lined up). And the space is wasted. The space is small but we still waste it because of the TV. If the TV is turned to the right position, it’d not be that good looking.  

This tenant had reasoned that filling up the space was not the same as using it well. He felt it necessary to “waste” space in order to create a more comfortable environment. Home 12 also talked about having to “waste” space around the door, where they had placed their rocking chair, or visually the space would be too packed. Space utilisation, even in the densest situations, is not the only spatial concern. The more clear thinking tenants, who had reflected on the problem of space, had framed the problem, considered the implications of various options and had come to the conclusion that space must be visually comfortable in order to function well.

Domestic Perceptions

The popular conception of a HKHA home is of a crowded, densely packed space full of furniture, clothes and personal possessions; a chaotic and disorganised space. But the idea that in Hong Kong that high density negates design and spatial order is unfair to those families who have coped well with this situation. It is damning to make the assumption that this section of the community, or “Hong Kong people” have no interest in their home and no concept of spatial order - without supporting this theory with appropriate evidence. I am inclined to be more positive about the way in which people create a home for themselves within these small spaces. Clearly, however, some residents are more capable, and interested in spatial problem-solving than others.

Hong Kong public housing is populated almost exclusively by Hong Kong Chinese. It could be expected therefore that families would share a similar cultural view of spatial representation. Where there are differences it is likely to be associated with the degree to which they interpret or identify with this culture. But even within this limited sample of households, the variety of spatial interpretation indicates that residents’ ability to cope with high density is dependent more on the actual number of people living there, their lifestage, the family’s spatial awareness, family relationship, lifestyle, cultural values, and

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"Home 5"
education as well as their past dwelling experience. It is useful here to consider three homes as a case in point.

At 560 sq. feet Home 3 (App.1, 3:1) had the largest living space of all the flats.\(^9\) Theoretically this gave them the most design scope. The flat was originally allocated for 11 family members but now there were 6 people officially listed on the tenancy. Unofficially a married daughter, her husband and two children had recently moved in, bringing the numbers up to 10\(^6\). This family expressed little interest in improving the use of space. They admitted: “Our arrangement is not very good. We don’t care about such things.” Whatever changes had been made to the flat had been instigated by one of the sons, who was not present at the interview. It was evident that these respondents did not identify closely with the space. It was not that they were unable to do anything since they felt they had sufficient space, but rather that they were not sufficiently motivated. Their lack of interest towards their home is reflected in the lack of cohesive order; creating a casual, random setting with things placed for convenience. Ironically, this “freedom” from a conventional, logical, designed system of placement is perhaps more representative of Hong Kong space. Even diffidence to space is physically represented and can be read and decoded like any other spatial system.

With six adults living together in 200 sq. feet\(^1\) Home 8 (Plate 19) had every appearance of a space overwhelmed by density. The space was dark and oppressive, and packed full of things. The basic problem of how to accommodate 6 adults, to sleep, and live comfortably within these physical constraints made this a difficult problem to solve. Most of the space was taken up with beds, two bunk beds, and two folding camp beds. Every square inch seemed to have been used up, even the bedspace was used for storage. They admitted they were lazy about tidying up. They felt it was “like a sea of people, or a tin of sardines” but, at the same time, the family were philosophical about their situation.

We’re used to it and have adapted well. The situation was about the same when we were in Wong Tai Sin. We were able to live there even though the area was smaller than here.

They would have liked to buy a sofa, but there was no space for it, yet they could accommodate 18 people for dinner. Here, we would have to look hard to find examples of

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\(^9\) They had two proper bedrooms which were densely packed with two sets of bunkbeds, and in one a cot. The bedroom was only used for sleeping but they also set up camp beds in the living room at night in the summer.

\(^6\) A married daughter, her husband and two children were living there until their own flat was available.

\(^6\) Home 9 maintained it was 245 sq. feet.
design thinking. There is, however, insight to be gained from this home. For example, the mother was particularly attached to the large shrine dedicated to Wong Tai Sin, which acted as a focus to the main living space. Even in the most densely packed home, against the chaos of everyday material culture, clothes, artefacts, and hobbies that occupy valuable space, there are deep rooted dispositions affecting the way residents conceive of and represent their homespace.

Home 9, (Plate 20) an identical flat, next door to Home 8, was a complete physical contrast. Light and airy, it seemed to be a bigger flat; and a more pleasant place to live. Home 8 attributed the difference between these flats to the fact that in Home 9 they were “young and have a new lifestyle”. They observed: “Everything’s new and clean. They’re very willing to throw things away.” Home 8 and 9 were separate households but were originally allocated as one household comprising two small rooms. Originally the married son, with his wife and child, lived in Home 9 with two of the sisters. With the arrival of two more children the nuclear family gradually took over the whole flat, and the sisters moved next door to Home 8.42

The mother in Home 9 was young and clear thinking. She was able to cope with density by using space-saving custom-made furniture and using up every inch of space. She was able to limit the amount of items that were brought into the flat and could maintain order by continually throwing things out. She admitted, however, that day to living for five people in an non-partitioned space was not ideal and the children dreamed of one day having their own room. Her dwelling aspirations were much stronger than the family next door. She could also see how to control the space, and, more significantly, it mattered to her that it should be ordered.

I think it is handy for me. I mean...it’s comfortable to my eyes. I don’t care about other people...the most important thing it’s comfortable for us. 43

Home 9 was competently organised. The spatial problem-solving involved creative thinking and was constructed with specific qualities in mind, through a deliberate thinking process that involved reflection-in-action in order to frame and solve the problem. It was not what might generally be recognised in design circles as a designed space but as a practitioner of spatial problem-solving the mother clearly demonstrated her grasp of the problem and of the implications involved from her decisions. Her attitude

42 For large families the HKHA often allocated two small rooms and allowed the family to open up the wall between flats. This family decided it was better to keep both households separate.
43 Home 9
contrasted with others largely on account of her motivation to take whatever steps she could think of, within her power, to control the problem of density.

"We Are Chinese"

In her study of contemporary Chinese homes, Laing observed, there were still traces of traditional Chinese practices. This sense of space was more than just a personal artistic preference, but was derived from a deeper knowledge that this was the right and proper placement.

In none of the HKHA publications is there any mention that these homes were ever consciously designed to fit with Chinese domestic culture. These are modern blocks designed, rather brutally, to an efficient plot ratio, where the flats themselves are little more than simple rectangular boxes. This, however, is not always how residents see it. In Home 7, for example, one resident, in her late '60s, firmly believed that the HKHA had designed her flat to accommodate the "honourable place" which, from her experience would have been built into the traditional dwellings.

"Tudi must be placed in front of the door no matter it's a shop or...look, the honourable place is for the ancestors. That wall with the calendar is for holding ancestral tablets...That honourable place is for ancestors....The Honourable place is on your left according to the main door. The side to the left of the door is called the honourable place."

She was lucid in her reasoning and so confident that the flat had been designed according to these cultural rules, that it momentarily changed my research assistant's perception of the HKHA. It is more likely, however, that this woman’s perception of space was developed from, and inclined towards, a deep rooted cultural view that the HKHA would deliberately design these buildings as homes for Chinese people.

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47 Home 7 - Grandmother
Within traditional religious beliefs there is a legitimate spatial knowledge. This affects the way family members conceive of their homespace. For traditionally minded residents it is important to place a small tablet to Tudi, or the sky god, so the family in the home so they will have “an easy conscience” and to protect the family. Berkowitz\(^a\) attributes the modern day decline of traditional religious practice in everyday life to the fact that Hong Kong is moving from localism to universalism. This, he ascribes not to industrialisation but to the mobility of the people, since most Hong Kong people are removed from their native place\(^b\) in China - the land from where many of these rituals (and older tenants) is derived. There is little in any of the studies of Folk Religion in Hong Kong that refers to the placement of icons in the modern, high-density homespace. Myers mentions the problem of adapting religion to the nuclear family and to high density space\(^c\) but does not expand on this with the same depth of knowledge as the respondent in Home 7.

In this study of design knowledge it is impossible to ignore the cultural factors affecting the way Hong Kong residents read space. Residents’ possess a legitimate knowledge of space which has been adapted to fit high density space. It is clear that this knowledge has a deeper meaning within the representation of space that often goes beyond rational spatial knowledge, within the Hong Kong home.

In many Hong Kong homes, the family shrine is still an important cultural and religious object\(^b\) but there appear to be different personal folk model interpretations of the rules that are said to determine its placement. Some say it must face the door, others say only that it should be placed in a prominent position: in each example the respondent is absolutely certain. To the outsider this seems to be a contradiction within the theory but personal folk models by virtue, can be idiosyncratic with multiple versions, each of which

\(^a\)M.I. Berkowitz, The Tenacity of Chinese Folk Tradition - Two Studies of Hong Kong Chinese, Occasional Paper, No. 33 Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1975
\(^b\)Ibid., p. 22

Native place is the well spring of one’s being; when it loses importance to the individual, he is sliding away from his traditional Chinese beliefs and practices.


Residents of the early estates, who had to cook on the corridor found it was inappropriate to place the kitchen god outside of the home. Tu-Ti, however, proved less of a problem since it can simply be in the form of an incense holder and tablet.

\(^d\)M.I.Berkowitz.op., cit., p. 18
There is a grey area between Chinese cultural practice and Chinese religion. 50% of the people in this study did not consider themselves to be traditionally religious but this is because religion is part of their everyday life and they do not distinguish between the two.

They’re religious in the sense of believing, but not worshipping; they acknowledge the presence of God in many activities of everyday life; but because they do not separate their religious from their mundane experiences they do not count this as religion.
presumes to be the correct. Often the only reason that residents would offer to explain this cultural knowledge of space was: “because we are Chinese”.

The anthropologist, Barbara Ward,\(^{52}\) in her study of the conscious model points out this response is not just a stock answer. Chinese people genuinely believe that this is the correct explanation for almost every part of their social organisation and cultural behaviour. Ward notes:

> The conscious model of their own social system which they carry in their minds and which they use to explain, predict and justify their actual behaviour is labelled “Chinese”. It is perhaps unnecessary to add that this insistence upon “Chinese-ness” is accompanied by an unshakeable conviction that all things Chinese are inherently superior.\(^{53}\)

The consciousness of this model draws on a deeper knowledge of the literati model, of “real Chineseness”. In the everyday context, however, “we” refers not to the ideological model but to an immediate, home-made model\(^{54}\) which applies more directly to their way of life as Chinese. In appropriating their homes some residents believe it is because “we are Chinese”, that the space “must be” or “should be” represented a certain way.

Ward suggests the only people who can truly observe differences between immediate models are cultural outsiders. Insiders can only observe another’s model of Chineseness against what they hold as their own home-made conscious model, a version of the literati model. It is therefore understandable that my research assistant and I would see each of the homes differently because we were looking at it from a very different social stock of knowledge and experience.

For everyday living the individual refers to a personal conscious model.\(^{55}\) However, due to the pluralistic nature of modern society there may be considerable variety between

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\(^{53}\) Ibid., p. 42

\(^{54}\) Barbara E. Ward, *op. cit.* p. 80

Ward developed this theory from Levi-Strauss’ version of conscious model.

A people’s Folk Model is, in effect, their whole culture seen from the ‘emic’ point of view. Thus it includes ‘values’ and ‘beliefs’ as well as folk taxonomies, cosmologies etc. and all the native knowledge of the practice and theory of the objects and patterns of everyday living, economic, political, kinships and religious behaviour and so on and so forth.

\(^{55}\) Ibid., p. 95

(i) Folk Model (postulated, objectified, thought of as being ‘out there’) and (ii) personal model (total stock of a particular individual’s knowledge about how things are and ought to be) of which one section, so to speak, is, (iii) the personal version of his people’s Folk Model or personal folk model for short.
personal models, according to the total stock of knowledge - that which they have learned, experienced and been told. My research assistant and the woman in Home 7 clearly possess quite different knowledge of what it means to be Chinese. The values of the individual pertain to their personal model but these are always versions of their peoples’ Folk Model. In a modern day context the individual’s social experience, habitus and education will naturally affect their belief in their people’s folk model. For example, when we asked if there was a reason why the shrine must face the door younger family members generally knew that it must, but significantly, deferred to someone older to spell out why. One mother explained:

Well, it should. It is ancestral. The ancestors have passed the custom since the old days. It’s been like that; it should face the main door. 57

Similarly, in Home 1 the mother also asserted that the family shrine must face the door. (Plate 24) Her son considered this to be an irrational restriction on the way the space could be laid out. However, the mother’s belief in her personal folk model was so strong she could not be swayed by the son’s reasoning, and more importantly, could not be comfortable unless her home coincided with her personal folk knowledge of space. While younger people are aware of general Folk Model rules affecting domestic space this competes with other influences affecting how they relate generally to space. And, as each generation experiences a different social and built environment we are bound to see transformations in the personal folk model and adherence to the cultural sense of the “proper” way to arrange domestic space.

Although most Chinese people have some knowledge of the general concepts of fung-shui most people that we interviewed claimed they did not follow fung-shui practices. Generally, they seemed to be bemused that the question should be asked at all. A spate of bad luck within the family can often trigger a re-examination of the space according to fung-shui principles. In Home 12, after the son had died, neighbours suggested that newly constructed wall opposite the family flat may have contributed in some way to the family’s bad luck. One family member said the flat made her feel “compressed” and in summer the space felt muggy and hot. To deflect the bad fung-shui the family placed a pair of stone lions and cacti on the window opposite to the offending wall.

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57 Their people means the group with which they identify, for example, version of Chineseness such as Hong Kongese, Taiwanese, or American born Chinese.
58 Home 3
59 Fung-shui literally translates as wind and water. It refers to the Chinese art of placement – highlighting the most auspicious/inauspicious position and sitting within a landscape, house or room.
However, it may be unwise to read too much into the significance of individual everyday cultural elements without considering their presence and placement in a holistic context. For example, Home 4 were Roman Catholics; this was evident from the placement of a crucifix inside the main entrance yet they also had lucky red mottoes pasted up in the flat and an image of Wong Tai Sin over the kitchen door. Taken on face value, this might seem to indicate evidence of contradictory belief systems but Hong Kong’s cultural identity is such a hybrid of traditional, modern and popular culture that the iconic value of the object assumes a new interpretation as it is consumed and recontextualised by the family.

It seems fair to say that local values of domestic space are shifting. The traditional concepts of placement and order now have to compete with a Western design knowledge and interpretation of domestic space. Clearly, younger people have been exposed to different spatial knowledge and values from their parents’ generation. The question whether or not, or in what way, this deeper cultural knowledge of domestic will endure largely depends on the personal conscious model of the younger generation. It remains to be seen therefore, how the spatial values of the younger generation will develop through the choices they make, by what they articulate to be important in the appropriation of domestic space and how this is represented in the home.

Time-Space Dynamics

There’s one difference between day and night. It’s the only one. We have to eat after we come back from work then we must use this table. Once it is placed in the centre, I feel that there’s no space left. We cannot put the table beside the bed while eating because it’s not hygienic. It’s not possible to do everything by the bed so we have to pull it into the centre which makes us feel good psychologically. I will sit here as a habit, as I don’t like to sit there. In short, both of us, will not sit close to the bed but a bit further away from it... Sometimes he eats with us and he sits on that side. Three of us must sit like this otherwise we can’t watch TV. When there’s only my mother and me, we pull the table there (centre). After she finishes eating...she always blocks my view from watching TV because I will sit here (the corner of the sofa) then I will not sit beside the table after I’ve finished eating.”

Every family said they felt the density more at night. During the day, with fewer people at home, density was not a problem. Home 12 appeared to have appropriated the space very

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* Home 12
well but, as the daughter explained, the problem was not about fitting the furniture into
the space but rather how that space was used when everyone was home. The difficulty
they encountered was how to accommodate every family member’s needs even when
they were passively watching TV. In Hong Kong public housing, the physical relationship
between the bed, dining table and TV might be similar to a studio apartment, occupied by
a whole family. Inevitably this can give rise to stress, and frustration. As PS3 observed, in
their old flat they found they had to give way to each other.

We had just a small flat. The sofa was a two-seater. Once in a while, when
we’re all watching TV, when my son wanted to go to the toilet, he had to
“reserve” his seat: “that’s mine, I’m sitting here when I come out”......so
when he came out, and he hadn’t booked it, and his dad or me had sat on
it, he said, “I have booked it, please stand up” ...It was true! We really
shouted “booked,” “reserved” before.....I did the same. If not, I had
nowhere to sit. 

This family was able to laugh about their “booking” system, which evolved as a density
coping mechanism. These everyday experiences of density are more easily articulated in
retrospect. At the time, they would have been taken-for-granted and suppressed. There
must be many more such examples: the morning rush for the bathroom, the circulation
problem of the balcony space used for cooking, hanging laundry and access to the
bathroom.

High density space is never static. Residents clearly expressed the need to have a bigger
living space, as opposed to bigger bedrooms, to create a multi-functional space, which can
be re-arranged to suit different activities over the course of the day. It is likely that they
rarely noticed how much they are engaged in creating their own dynamic within the space
or how family members create their own domains through their routine.

When it is crammed full of people, usually my mother is responsible for
cooking, in the kitchen. Others, my father for example, or...any of my
family members come, some of them will stay on the sofa watching TV or
reading the newspaper. In the main, they stay on the sofa or sometimes
around the dining table. But basically they all face the TV.

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60 Pilot Study 3. This example reminds me of my own experience growing up in a big family. We
too would also “book” our seats since there were not enough comfortable seats to accommodate all
of us when watching television. By comparison to the Hong Kong situation of high-density, we had
4 bedrooms and two sitting rooms (only one of which was ever heated) but only one television.
61 The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Architectural Dept. study posted on the internet clearly
shows how a typical homespace over the course of a day is continually affected by the shifting of
furniture to accommodate the family’s daily activities.
See: http://www.arch.cuhk.hk/harmony/movie/ftbed.mov.
62 Home 1
In the evening, when most family members are at home, the living space becomes most crowded. Some family members might be doing their homework, others might be watching TV and others engaged in domestic chores. The family evening meal one activity that brings the whole family to gather together in the space. This often requires a simple re-arrangement of the furniture to accommodate everyone around the table: unstacking or unfolding stools, extending or setting up the dining table. (App.1, 12.1) Residents' ability to maintain a maximum use of space is facilitated by the use of flexible furniture. The dining table in particular is in demand at different times of the day and is moved around the space depending on the activity. For example, in the morning it may be folded against the wall, used as a mahjong table in the afternoon, set up for children to do their homework late afternoon, in the evening it will be used for family dining and later for study. Before the family goes to bed it will be put against the wall to enable the folding nylon camp beds or sofa bed to be set up. Residents might be unaware of these actions and find that this practice becomes an unconscious part of their everyday life.

Everyday's the same. Y'know, sometimes we extend the table and have meals, it's...but you'll get accustomed to it and you won't have that feeling any more.63

In most Western homes there is not the same need to maintain the same level of flexibility and multi-functional aspect of space. Furniture is more likely to be fixed and the setting can be left for periods without having to be disturbed. This is a luxury of space that cannot be achieved in high density. Fixed elements will be placed along the wall but wherever possible furniture must be multi-functional, flexible and easy to move. Home PS2 demonstrated the space-saving merits of their drop-leaf dining table. (Plate 25)

Our dining table was not like this one. It was a folding table which we bought from China Products. That type of table is dangerous and heavy. We put it in the balcony, beside the glass door. Every time we ate, we had to bring it out and no-one liked having to do it. Later, it was broken because we used it so often. Eventually, we changed it for this new one. This new one is pretty good. We can pull it out and it provides chairs. In fact, we're desperate to buy a proper dining table. We'd searched for quite some time but a proper dining table would use up a lot of space. This one is good ..the chairs can be put inside.64

The most popular choice for dining was a metal folding table with laminate top, but other choices always had some degree of built-in spatial flexibility; extensions, a round table top for large gatherings (placed on top of a smaller table), or a drop-leaf table.

63 Home 10
64 Pilot Study 2
In Home 2 the family had adapted the balcony into a “bedroom” for the son. However, it still functioned as a laundry room and was open to the living area. This caused time-scheduling conflicts in the use of space.

Yes, I wake up early in the morning to do the chores, walk about and move around. That’s true. That’s annoying I know. Sometimes I switch on the washing machine to wash the clothes and I know it’s no good for him. He wants a room of his own so that he can do whatever he pleases without being disturbed by others. Now he just has a place to sleep but there isn’t a proper place for him to do anything else. Right? When we watch TV at night, he has to go into the room, close the door and do his homework. If his sisters come home early, he leaves them no place to sleep. So he has to carry his homework, moving from place to place. It’s a pity for him. We really don’t have enough space.

If not all family members operate on the same work schedule this enables the family to save space by reducing the number of beds, by using the same bed in shifts or sleeping on the floor. In Hong Kong people often work long and irregular hours, a family may live together yet rarely see each other because of their different routines. Some may sleep late, others have to wake early, they come and go at different times. While this lifestyle eases the pressure of density in the home it takes away from the quality of family life. In the case of Home 4, however, after the family had constructed a bedroom their son’s irregular sleeping patterns could be more easily accommodated.

My youngest son is a taxi driver. He wakes at four or five o’clock in the morning and works until two or three o’clock in the afternoon and then he’ll take a nap inside the bedroom. After finishing dinner, we wipe the floor and there he sleeps.

Even today, having a bed of one’s own, in some households might be seen as a relative luxury. In the family it is more likely to be the boys, rather than girls who have to do without a bed or room. Without a room of their own, students need to adjust their time of working to when other family members have gone to bed so they can work on the dining table in the living area. It is normal practice for students to work late at night. One student goes to bed for four hours after dinner and wakes up just as the rest of the family are going to bed so she can use the dining table for her work. In a small space the close proximity means that everyone has to try to accommodate each other as much as possible. The remarkable thing is that it all seems to work, but this is only through tolerance and consideration for each other. Family members may have to sacrifice their TV viewing to

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1 Home 2
2 Home 4
3 I met someone who was brought up in a Mark I flat who told me he had never had a proper bed until he was twenty. Before that he had only ever slept on a mat on the floor or a folding bed.
allow students more peace and quiet to work. One mother complained about the
difficulties of living in a one-room space.

I can’t watch TV when they are doing their homework....they are not
attentive, you know....daughters...I can’t switch the TV on, so I hardly get
to watch it...I reserve the time for them to work...it’s totally impossible,
there is no space, you see...and it’s too small for a room.6

There are some remarkable stories of people who are able to study and work at home
despite the crowded conditions, distractions and lack of space. In general Hong Kong
people do not complain. There would be little point. From their experience everyone is in
the same situation. Density is a way of life in Hong Kong, it is never used as an excuse for
underachieving. Students, like anyone else, are expected to find ways to cope with the
problem.

Lee7 calls for more research into the various physical, social-cultural and psychological
coping mechanisms of high density living. He suggests that anthropologists could identify
coping behaviours, which could then be verified by sociologists and psychologists in a
controlled setting. Ultimately he feels this data on density should be used to develop an
understanding of the biosocial implications of housing estate design to minimise the
negative effects of density and maximise positive effects. It is significant that this
respected scholar should perceive the importance of environmental design in alleviating
the effects of density, yet he does not see, or has no knowledge of design research as a
useful approach to facilitate an understanding of density. I also take issue with Lee’s idea
that a controlled setting can give an accurate reading of the problem and solutions or that
coping mechanisms, once discovered, should be “systematically verified”. Clearly what is
becoming clear through this study is how coping mechanisms are part of the day to day
aspects of density and dwelling and by virtue are difficult to articulate, to identify and
separate from the everyday domestic setting. In a controlled setting therefore, it would be
more difficult to relate to the significance of the phenomenological and socio-cultural
coping mechanisms of dwelling. Perhaps the issue is not that coping mechanisms need to
be verified, but rather appreciated within their everyday context.

From this study it is clear that the socio-cultural, physical and psychological data must be
studied holistically. Verification must come from the residents not the researcher, whose
role should be to closely observe the significance and context of everyday experience

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6 Pilot Study 1
7 Rance P.L. Lee, “High-Density Effects in Urban Areas: What Do We Know and What Should We
Do?” in Ambrose Y.C. King & Rance P.L. Lee (eds.) op., cit.,
within spatial density. Design research addresses all of the issues identified by Lee yet permits a more open reading of space and spatial interpretation. What is important to note here is not the existence of the phenomenon of density but rather how this phenomenon relates holistically through the process of dwelling to the experience of domestic space. It is this knowledge of living in density, as living knowledge rather than knowledge of density per se, that has been sadly lacking within existing research.
Everyday Consumption

As we become accustomed to, and lay claim to, this little niche in the world, we project something of ourselves onto its physical fabric. The furniture we install, the way we arrange it, the pictures we hang, the plants we buy and tend, are all expressions of our image of ourselves, all are messages about ourselves that we want to convey back to ourselves, and to the few intimates that we invite into this, our house.1

It is often said that Hong Kong people are great collectors and never throw things out. There is some truth in this. Density in many households is often made worse by residents’ predisposition to fill up the space, with what some families referred to jokingly as “junk.” Clearly there must be good reason for this and we must look beyond density to better understand how, as representational spaces, what it is, according to Lefebvre,7 that makes these spaces “alive”, “qualitative, fluid and dynamic”. And, as represented spaces, what it is that makes these home “speak”.

To an outsider, first and foremost, these homes “speak” of density. Density that is imposed and density produced by the residents. The obvious solution to this perceived as a problem, would be for residents to reduce the amount of possessions in the home and curtail their consumption. But the issue here is whether consumption is perceived by the residents to be a problem, or as a way of life?

In Home 5 the family were fully aware they would have more space if they cleared out the flat. Their reluctance to do so was an indication that they valued these items; not for their intrinsic value but for their usefulness, or potential usefulness.

Well, we are...it’s crammed with too many things. For others...I have some friends, well, better off friends. They throw everything that is no longer useful to them. But we are reluctant to do so, that’s why the things become more and more... Some of my friends’ homes are over one thousand (square) feet but they don’t have too much stuff, quite empty I would say. I looked in their drawers, there was nothing inside. They have a large place and lots of cabinets but there’s nothing inside. ... We could have reduced our things to half..... We’re just unwilling to throw them away.....

This respondent perceived that it was only wealthy people who could easily throw things out - even though they had more space to keep things. It was by choice that this family

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3 Home 5.
kept so many things, “reducing things by half” was not an option they were prepared to consider as a solution to density. In general, public housing residents’ attitude to consumption, to buying and keeping things does not appear to be as restricted by density as one might think. As one mother explained, older people like to keep things.

For example, we put the useless things underneath the beds. They always say that I keep all the useless things. You know the elderly are like this. They may be of no use now, but they may be useful in the future. Right? There’s no point in wasting money like this.⁴

There is a marked contrast in consumption attitudes between the older and younger generation. This may be true of older people anywhere but in this context these residents were of an age where they more likely to be emigrants from China, their need to keep so many things relates to their past experience when things were not so easy to come by. The mother in Home 8 admitted she saved the family’s old clothes to take back to relatives in the Mainland thus extending the use of these items considered old, or unfashionable by Hong Kong standards.⁵

In the absence of spacious rooms roof spaces, attics, garages, sheds, cellars or built in cupboards for storage, bulky items that the family might wish to be hidden, must be exposed. Bulky clutter tended to be placed near the door, over time other clutter built up around it and the setting became permanent. Their placement, on the periphery of the room, indicated that these items were visually removed from the main view of the living space. Residents also made full use of surfaces, partitions, and conduits as a convenient place to hang umbrellas, bags or clothes. Spatial appropriation was not always a conscious or deliberate action but often based on what was convenient and close to hand. Home 6 even appropriated the open louvred window in the kitchen for setting small everyday items. (App.I, 6:2)

Unlike most other families, Homes 9 and 12 consciously decided not to hoard things and made a special effort to keep their possessions to a minimum. These families had a clear sense of what they needed and could consciously control the amount of belongings they chose to keep which meant they had to be unsentimental about possessions, old school books and clothes. They observed that other families seemed to have “many shelves” “too many things”. But, as another family put it “The longer you live in one place, the harder it is for you to get rid of stuff...” Even in high density not everything people kept appeared

⁴ Home 10
⁵ With the economic growth in China, especially in Southern Guandong province it will be interesting to see if there comes a time when Mainland relatives will rate Hong Kong cast-offs less highly.
to be essential items. One family had two hi-fi's, another had three TV's, (one of which did not work) another family had two fridges, one of which was twenty years old. As a measure of the enduring quality, and usefulness of objects this family still kept a large plastic bin they had used in the 1960s for the water shortage, which they now used for storing their winter quilts.

The amount of things that Hong Kong people choose to keep might defy an outsider's sense of spatial logic. But it would be difficult for many to easily change their attitude to consumption and spatial representation. If people feel more comfortable in a home that is full of things, they will react against imposed order to create a space that feels more like a home. This is what we have seen in the example of the Wong family, discussed in the Introduction to Part 1. In this example, what the designers had not bargained for was the Wongs' adherence to a system of space which from the designers' point of view was the symptom of bad planning and lack of order. While one solution might be to provide more storage space to improve resident's needs there is, however, no guarantee that people would limit their belongings to fit an assigned space.

A Place for Things

Because the old wardrobe...has been used for some ten years. The hinges of the wardrobe came off here and there. That is...whenever it was opened, we had to spend a long time to fix it up. That day, I went shopping with my daughter. I liked the wardrobe. It is not very expensive and we could afford it. And ....their daddy seldom bought things for them. I'd wondered if the height would fit our flat. He (the shopkeeper) said that it would fit the place because it was made to suit the height (of ordinary flats)...'

If tenants had an idea that they wanted to replace an item of furniture they would be likely to visit the furniture shops attached to the estate first. These shops cater directly for the needs of these kind of flats, offering a range of appealing styles inexpensively priced and purposely designed to fit the space. Tenants' most ready-made solution to the problem of storage was to buy a large floor-to-ceiling cabinet to make the most of the full vertical height.

Neighbours are a common source of ideas and knowledge especially where residents wanted to judge for themselves what others had done to solve a particular problem or to

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* Home 11
determine how well a certain piece of furniture looked *in situ*. In Home 6, the organisation of space and selection of furniture was attributed to the mother, the daughter, however was reluctant to call this "taste".

She doesn't have taste. She saw that out neighbour next door had bought a chest like this and she thought it was quite good, and she bought it...it doesn't show any special intention...Most of the time she followed others to buy things which she thought quite good and the price quite reasonable. And the bed too. She saw that a friend in another district had a bed like this. She said it was quite nice...You can sleep in it and put stuff in the drawers underneath...and she bought it. 7

Public housing residents learn about different ways of using space from each other. They not only share a common experience space but can develop this into a practical problem-solving knowledge by discussing and sharing ideas. Neighbours provide valuable insight and pass on their experiences and techniques in problem-solving. It is a common sense knowledge approach to problem-solving to develop a solution through local knowledge, from neighbours and shops. Residents might be more re-assured to invest in a particular piece of furniture if they have already seen it in a neighbour’s home. The mother in Home 6 may not have been inspired to come up with an “original” idea, but she was consciously developing her own design knowledge and taste. Residents are not driven to invent new solutions but they are looking for practical solutions in an acceptable aesthetic, what they see as being the “right ones for us”, which normally conforms to the taste within the habitus. Therefore, what they see as being a suitable choice must suit not only the space, but also the style of living with which they wish to be associated.

International stores such as IKEA are popular with the middle class and expatriates in Hong Kong but their products, especially storage systems, face stiff competition from local shops in terms of price and style. Major stores such as Seahorse, Yaohan and China Products were identified as a range of furniture that residents felt was designed to suit local needs and taste. As Miller notes, through the habitus consumers were able to limit their range of choices to certain stores.

Bourdieu’s habitus is deeply rooted in material culture as in cognitive orders and social divisions, and it provides the means for combining an approach to all three. It also accounts for the extraordinary ability of shoppers to select from a huge array those goods most appropriate to themselves and their close friends or relatives. 8

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1 Home 6
Compared to the limited range of furniture available in the sixties, there is now a thriving industry catering for the local market offering a wide range of custom-made, space-saving furniture at a reasonable price. (Plate 26) This appeals greatly to younger families who tend to be in a better position to acquire new furniture and tend to be more assertive in their tastes. Currently the most popular material is a painted MDF finish, which comes in many different colours, and treatments - although white, seems to be the most popular. In the showroom customers discuss their requirements with the shop assistant based on the examples on display. This will then be custom-made according to their specified needs: the number of drawers, glass panels, internal lights, grooves, handles and paint finish. This gives the consumer maximum choice and helps them to identify more closely with the finished piece. The mother in Home 9 was confident in her decision-making "....the cabinets, for instance, the number of drawers they should have, the number of shelves etc. I chose them. I planned them." (App.1: 9:1) The cabinet was required to house the television, to display the family brandies and range of ornaments as well as providing general storage space. Since the cabinet was to be the focus of the room it clearly mattered to her that it should both look well and suit her specific needs.

Custom-made furniture is a relatively recent phenomenon in Hong Kong and parallels the rise in living standard. It is a convenient and efficient service Hong Kong consumers have come to expect offering a wide range of finishes, and quick delivery. Consumers may design their own piece based on a combination of features on offer. The shop will make anything to suit customers' taste.

Living room cabinets are often highly experimental design: combining arches, pediments, pillars and capitals in various paint finishes (current favourite green coloured metallic, or blue/purple marbleised) and mirrors or bevelled glass cut to any shape and form. It is clearly a developing style that is based on a strong desire to achieve maximum visual effect.

These furniture companies also manufacture bunkbeds specifically designed for high density living complete with built-in cupboards, wardrobes, drawers, lights and capable of sleeping three through the use of a lower-level pull-out bed. (Plate 20) This appears to be a very popular choice as siblings now expect to have their own bed, where in the past they would have shared. In order to appeal to children, as consumers, the showroom provides a range of motifs of popular cartoon characters. The child selects their favourite

* Home 9
images then chooses where they want them to be positioned—so that the furniture is customised to suit their individual taste.  

Normally the double bed version will have a light, cupboards and display shelving built into the bed-head and with more extensive storage space below. The bed-head thus, becomes a space-saving substitute for bed-side tables. But, as one shopkeeper pointed out most customers today do not like to use the full-height vertical cupboard model - used by Home 6- as it makes them feel claustrophobic and over emphasises the density within the space. (Plate 27)  

Increasingly, public housing residents will call on the help of outside expertise to help them think of new ways of using the space. Residents spoke casually about “getting a man in”. They would normally only employ a contractor if they had a strong idea beforehand of what they wanted but were not able, or not interested, in constructing it themselves. In Home 12, the daughter had a positive view of the role of a contractor for high-density space. She had a clear idea that she did not want to buy a separate bed, wardrobe and shoe cabinet from the shops because she felt this would occupy too much space.

Most of the people living in public estates, if clever enough, will call decorators in...telling them the places where you want a shoe cabinet and where you need a wardrobe.. it’s better to make them fit.....it’s stupid to buy from shops now...a waste of money...”

Thus, with the help of the contractor she devised a clever problem-solving solution combining the wardrobe, bed and a shoe cabinet. (Plate 28) 12 These contractor/decorators have extensive experience working in high density domestic environments, and possess a specialist design knowledge to help people solve their spatial problems in ways the tenant might never have considered. Their professional knowledge is in fact, a more useful source of ideas to HKHA tenants than design magazines, based on larger spaces with less spatial constraints and bigger budgets.

In high density space, every available space, especially areas out of sight, under the beds, behind beds and behind cabinets will be used for storage. Residents prioritise their possessions according to quality and use, which also affects how and where they are stored. Bachelard highlights the significance behind the wardrobe’s hidden spaces.

10 These motifs are usually square panels with grooved and painted cartoon images.
11 Home 12
12 The bed itself was custom-made by the contractor and was hollow to provide extra storage.
Only an indigent soul would put just anything in a wardrobe. To put just anything, just any way, in just any piece of furniture, is the mark of unusual weakness in the function of inhabiting. In the wardrobe there exists a centre of order that protects the entire house against uncurbed disorder. Here order reigns, or rather, this is the reign of order. 13

Here Bachelard suggests that a tidy wardrobe indicates a tidy, ordered home. Therefore, the family’s sense of spatial order can be traced to the method of appropriating not just the visible space but also the hidden spaces. As Home 11 explained, and there is every reason to assume this applies to other families, there must be a system of order to storage. For example, items that are put inside a wardrobe space, as a specific centre of storage, are likely to be more highly valued than items placed under the bed.

All our beds are bunk beds. So, we can put things underneath. For others who have Western style beds they can’t. We make use of all the space underneath the beds. For example, now it is summer, and we put the winter clothes inside the bags and put a few camphor balls before tying them up. Then we put them underneath the beds. If, in winter, after we have taken out all the cotton quilts, which are very bulky, we will have more space on top of the cupboards so we can put summer clothes inside the cupboards. In summer we don’t have enough space after we put the cotton quilts up there because they are very bulky. So we have to put less expensive clothes like ordinary jackets, vests of less high quality and those that are frequently worn underneath the beds. For clothes of better quality, we put them inside the cupboards. 14

Storage is a temporal and seasonal problem. When extra storage is required, and where there is no space for a cabinet, the most convenient alternative was to make use of plastic storage boxes. (App.1, 3:4) These fitted under the beds, on top of cupboards and, for convenience, were even placed on the beds during the day and on the floor at night. However, the most popular ad hoc method to store clothes was the ubiquitous red, white and blue plastic bag, black bin bags or carrier bags. As one residents commented: “Very often people put their clothes into bags. When seasons change, they just take different bags.” Where there was no room for a wardrobe several families used hooks or a plastic chain device, from which they could hang clothes vertically – as one family joked, “people use this in boutiques”

In the most crowded homes even the space inside the bed becomes an important place used for personal storage. Clothes might be hung on the rungs of the bunk (inside and outside), squeezed to the side of the bed, to the foot of the bed or folded up on a shelf running the length of the bed on the wall side. (App.1, 11:3) Without a room of her own,

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14 Home 11
the daughter in Home 12 recalled, how, as a child it was important to be surrounded by your personal effects.

.....For example, if you sleep here, you'll have all your personal belongings around you. If two girls share the bunks, they will hang their things around, anywhere that’s close to them. You can’t help it people always put their own things beside their pillows or their feet. Some even nail a bookshelf at the end of the bed...I did that in my schooldays, brown metal framework... hung up by angled brackets (dexion)...I slept on the upper bunk, and there was a bookshelf it was full of my books, my favourite playthings, photo-frames, notebooks and everything...it was a happy time... At that time a “beautiful” bookshelf on the upper bunk was very popular in our estates. Then we used a piece of cloth to cover it, (the bed) a cloth to pull across. So smart! Sometimes a kid named Siu Ming came and called me out to play. We played “cats cradle”... the sliding curtain was so popular too.....we played with “stickers”, dressing -up dolls, all on the upper bunk... All our favourite playthings were put up there. Well it was a bit hot, though we didn’t feel it when we started playing....

Her memory of her bed is recalled in vivid detail through events and objects. It mattered that this was her own “beautiful” shelf, full of her personal things, in her personal space. (Plate 29) She used a little curtain to make it even more beautiful, to hide the things inside making them even more precious to her. Her things, behind her curtain, in her bed. Thus, Bachelard’s concept of home as a shelter of dreams may be broken down further to specific details perceived as spaces within the space as he emphasises the importance of fixed-space within memory.

We live fixations, fixations of happiness. We comfort ourselves by reliving memories of protection. Something closed must retain our memories, while leaving them their original value as images.

The recollection of a space comes from an awareness of the detail observed up close, day in day out and through daydreams. The space of the bed, as a fixed space, becomes a “resting-place for day dreaming”. The child’s daydream, through solitude and boredom engages her with the space and instills in her “dream values” to a place where “memories are rooted”. It may be comforting for the adult to recall, what Bachelard refers to as, “maternal features” of the home. The bed, thus is an invisible link to childhood experience associated with a specific object and representing space in the home.

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55 Home 12  
56 Gaston Bachelard, op. cit., p. 6
Another girl jokingly referred to her bed as her “room” - the area surrounding the top bunk appropriated as her own personal space. (Plate 30) She had a cupboard and shelf for clothes as well as books and a doll placed at the head of the bed. She had also fixed a pinboard to the wall along full length of the bed. Thus, surrounded by her own books and dolls, alarm clock, momentoes and photographs she could construct, organise and control her personal things as if it were her own room. Psychologically she identified the space surrounding the bed as a nest that she had built for herself. This was significant as it was probably the only the space within the flat that was exclusively hers. High density can deprive people from having a fixed bed. Thus, a bed of one’s own becomes even more important as a personal space than in homes where there is more space or proper bedrooms.

The Problem of Appliances

Nowhere is the contrast in the low standard of housing design and the rise in residents’ lifestyle more obvious than in the increase in electrical appliances within the home. With so many wires strung out all over the flat, across the floor, above the partitions, behind the cabinets and across the walls it was alarmingly clear that in most of these flats the powerpoints were seriously overloaded. (App.1, 11:3) With the increased demand for electrical appliances it was inevitable that residents would be forced to resort to using adapters, extensions and DIY wiring to accommodate their consumer needs.


The bedroom generally was valued by respondents of all ages as a space providing autonomy. For children it is a private area that gives a greater feeling of control over the activities and objects than other rooms and thus is a place where autonomy itself can be cultivated through dialogues with the self, mediated by cherished possessions.

18 In other families the lower bunk or a double bed might be used by other family members to rest during the day especially if their bed could only be put up at night. In Home 2 the son’s chest stretcher was hanging in his sister’s bed alongside her own momentoes an indication that he had made himself at home there.

19 Increased consumption has introduced a whole range of electrical appliances into the home - microwave, rice cooker, television, VCR, laser disc layer, mobile telephone, perhaps a light inside a display cabinet, refrigerator, washing machine, computer, the light of the shrine, not to mention smaller items such as hairdryers, clocks, stand-up fans. Home 11, for example, had one socket in the kitchen from which they ran at least 6 different appliances - they were not concerned that this might be a problem.

20 With only one air conditioner and main light source inevitably people - especially students - would require their own light fitting and fan by their bed in order to control the area around their space as a localised environment.
In the case of Home 1 the problem became potentially dangerous. Their arrangement of Hi-Fi speakers resulted not only in an ineffective sound system, but a serious electrical problem whereby a string of other wires from the Hi-fi system, speakers and television converged on a series of adapters, on an extension lead on a stool by the bunkbed. This “spiders web” of wires was the result of several factors: poor layout, inadequate provision of sockets and a cabinet that was too small to house this particular Hi-fi system.\textsuperscript{21}(App.1, 1.2)

It was clearly a design problem (and a safety issue) but there was no obvious solution. The mother thought the exposed wiring was dangerous and was concerned that it might catch fire. The son was frustrated that he was unable to find a better solution. They asked me, as a designer, how they could solve this problem? Put on the spot, for an instant design solution, they could have thought about rearranging the layout of the flat, buying a new wall unit or apply to the HKHA to install new powerpoints. Was there anything more immediate, less expensive or disruptive? They could tack the wires neatly but that would only fudge the problem. As a design problem there had to be a design solution. However, it was not immediately obvious what this might be. I was conscious that the constraints were not just physical, they were complicated first of all by the mother’s attitude to maintaining the existing layout and secondly, by the family’s reluctance to buy a new unit to house the television and Hi-fi neatly. They had reflected on the problem but mother and son had different interpretations of the problem. Problem solving is not just simply a result of resident’s ability to reflect on the problem. The real problem here was not just density but the residents’ level of commitment to taking action, or rather, the level of action they were prepared to take.

With so many people in a small space it could get very stuffy especially inside the bedspace. For ventilation purposes every family used an air-conditioner and perhaps an overhead fan. To solve this problem of temperature control nearly every bunk had its own small fan. (Plate 30) For added individual control within the space every bunk also required its own light, which further contributed to the problem of overloaded powerpoints and loose cables within the bedspace.

\textsuperscript{21} The unit was custom-made some years earlier and was placed in a different part of the flat—presumably before they acquired the hi-fi unit.
Lighting

H10a We had tried one with a pale yellow light. We felt uncomfortable. But I don’t know. Most people use this type. (fluorescent) And if you go to buy one and you do not specify which one, I think you’ll have one like this.

H10 I prefer this one. Those yellowish ones are not to my liking. I feel they blur the environment.

H10b Fluorescent tubes won’t make you dizzy.

H10a Well we don’t use others we only use this one

H10 That kind of light is not bright enough. Just like the sodium street lights, it’s quite dim.

Residents felt very strongly about having the right type of lighting; the consensus seems to be the brighter the better. They believed that “yellow” incandescent light was bad for the eyes, uneconomical and did not feel nearly as comfortable as the white light of a fluorescent tube. One tenant observed, people bought what the shops offered and the shops in turn offered what people bought - assuming this would be their choice. Fluorescent lighting was clearly the preferred choice in these homes. It may also have been the only choice they were offered, and thus the only choice they had ever considered. It is a harsh and cold light, making the interior stand out in sharp contrast - which is perceived as a good thing. Most families opted for a utilitarian bare single tube, without diffusers or dimmers. Most designers, and most Westerners, would feel a gentler light to be an essential quality for domestic space. In Hong Kong, however, people have grown accustomed to this quality of light in their homes and may be uncomfortable with anything that is less bright.

On the plus side, a fluorescent fitting was seen as a simple fitting with a pure light quality. It was also highly functional and made the space appear to be more cohesive. Many homes were so dark they had to be artificially lit during the day which made fluorescent lighting the most effective and economical solution. If everyone in the block had the same type of fitting it reinforced the idea that this preference, as Bourdieu points out, was “imposed by a social and economic necessity condemning “simple, modest people to simple, modest tastes”. It was the choice of the necessary. According to Bourdieu the

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21 One Chinese friend remarked that when her uncle came to visit he switched her uplights on full. He did not feel comfortable in subdued light where he could not see the whole space clearly. Similarly, when a group of students came to visit my flat they commented that it was very “dim” - whereas I thought I had achieved mellow ambience.

22 Fluorescent lighting was installed when they first moved in at a time when they were less well off. It was the simplest, and most economical solution to the problem. But it is also clear that people have grown accustomed to this quality of light and felt more comfortable with it.
“resignation to necessity is the basis of the taste of necessity” the resident was happy not
to waste time to have to consider other choices when he knew this was the choice for most
people, within their habitus. But in Hong Kong there is a strong disposition for fluorescent
lighting across different classes, income levels and scale of domestic space which suggests
it must be connected to a deeper cultural disposition towards a level of brightness for
overall environmental arousal and quality of space. Or, it may be the “taste of the
familiar”, In other words, what people have got used to is what they have come to prefer.

There are signs that this stated preference is changing. Home 12, for example, used a
combination of fluorescent tube together with a pretty glass/brass incandescent fitting
which they bought because “it looks warmer” - a tip they picked up from the television.
(App.1, 12:2) They admitted, however, they were not “accustomed to it” and used the
fluorescent light more. Another family had a combination of fluorescent strip, suspended
energy saving fitting (used for playing mahjong) and one halogen uplight. At night, they
commented that they could rely on the ambient light from the streetlights for moving
around the flat. 24

Home PS2 stood out from the others for their carefully considered lighting choices
comprising directional halogen spotlights and compact fluorescent fittings. The father
explained the reasons behind this selection.

..These lights are necessary while those are optional, why? ...Because at
night...we have seen...when we’re eating out, those lights shining on the
dishes to make them look better...Romantic sentiment we know it.
Originally we didn’t want that light. We used that one, the rays shine up.
We have a mercury-vapour lamp facing upwards. And that one shining
downwards. So when we’re eating at night, we get a romantic feeling....We
learned that from restaurants. 25

This family was not only more experimental with their lighting than most other families
but they had the design knowledge, and the interest to try out different ideas 26. They had
absorbed these new ideas from designed spaces and were prepared to re-create the same
effect at home. One of the most unusual things in this home was the presence of a table
lamp with silk shade, more commonly associated with Western domestic tastes, which
introduced a softer quality than is normally found in public housing homes.

24 Interestingly no-one thought to mention the red light from the shrine, various task lights, or the
light from the display cabinet. In addition there would be ambient light from the computer and
television. No-one felt the need to apply for authorisation for making these changes.
25 Pilot Study 2
26 This family were noticeably more sociably mobile than others. Tertiary educated themselves, (in
China) they had also educated both of their children to Tertiary level.
Fluorescent lighting was the stated preference within the public housing sphere but in the new Homeownership flats it is not uncommon for Hong Kong families to invest in a wider range of fittings: spotlights, mini-fluorescents or a mini-chandelier. (App.1, 2:1) Domestic lighting has become a growth consumer area. There are many more shops than before, which is bound to create more interest among the public. The mini-chandelier, as a symbol of luxury and status, is almost a standard element in the wealthier Hong Kong homes. As one family pointed out, for lower income families it only appeals to those who have the time and the inclination to keep it clean. (Plate14) Yet, the fact that they made reference to this form of lighting at all shows that they were conscious of it as a potential design choice. From fluorescent to chandelier the gap seems extreme. There is not the same concept of a range of light fittings, or lamps positioned in different levels within the space. In these public housing homes lighting was, principally, functional rather than aesthetic.

Leisure and Pleasure

Density is a factor in the way residents appropriate their homes, but it does not appear to be an overriding determinant. How then might one read the presence of a piano in 280 sq. feet public housing flat? As a luxury, or as a necessity? After my initial surprise of seeing a piano in PS2 I made the assumption that for the family to devote so much space to something this big it must be considered to be an essential - a child prodigy perhaps, or a music teacher? The interview revealed that the piano was no longer used by anyone in the family. Why then, with the restriction on space, would the family choose to keep something they did not use? One may speculate that it was a status feature, an element of luxury within a utilitarian space, and a focus of the space, or perhaps they were attached to it or had got used to it and it never occurred to them to remove it to create more space.

The assumption that density restricts lifestyle or that residents should sacrifice their interests because they live in high density is not always true. Some residents may spend more time outdoors with friends but leisure is still very much part of the Hong Kong home. Some residents mentioned that they liked to listen to the radio and it was self-evident that they read newspapers, comics and magazines, whereas books seemed to be only for study purposes, rather than leisure.
Where there was a personal computer it might be assumed that they also played computer games. However, watching television is the principal pastime in Hong Kong and the dominant form of recreation in the home. As the mother in Home 9 explained, it can be compulsive.

My husband doesn't have any hobbies. Look he likes to watch TV, listening to some music...he likes to rent home video movies....That's why he can record so many TV programmes. He has recorded a lot of Pearl dramas. When he doesn't have to work he stays at home all day watching TV.. from morning till night.

Claims that Hong Kong people watch only 3.2 hours TV per day seem somewhat misleading. When the family is at home the television is rarely turned off. It is always switched on during the family evening meal. It is not uncommon for families to have a television in the living area and a smaller one in each bedroom. However, multiple sets are not a direct reflection of income level. In high-density living a television in the bedroom gives occupants more control over their own space and a reason to remove themselves away from other family members. The television is not just a form of entertainment but also provides a means of psychologically switching off in the space; as important as daydreaming or fantasy. It is also used as white noise to mask sounds from the other flats and as a substitute for company when there is only one person at home.

As an outsider, it is staggering to see the extent of home entertainment equipment commonly found in low-income, high-density public housing flats both by the amount of space occupied and the quality of the equipment. In this respect, Hong Kong families fall

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28 South China Morning Post, 5/4/94. A poll conducted by the South China Morning Post discovered that “watching television is eight times more popular than horse racing in Hong Kong.”

29 Pedro Pak-tao Ng, The Family Material Possession Index: An Alternative Measurement of Socioeconomic Status in Hong Kong. Hong Kong The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1987. Ng uses a system of measuring family socio-economic status based on the level of consumer items present in the home. 99% surveyed said they had a television

30 Home 9

31 Joseph Man Chan & Paul S.N. Lee op. cit., In this study the authors found that people spent 3.25 hours a day watching television.

32 Ibid., The authors also found that TVB Jade was watched by 81.8 per cent. The English channels were more likely to be watched by “the male, the younger, the more educated and the more affluent” - though if the feature film is a recent blockbuster the ratings would likely be higher than...
in line with the class habitus, which emphasises the acquisition, and enjoyment of the latest range of electronic goods. It is a conspicuous form of consumption providing mass entertainment and access to popular culture. The derivation of enjoyment from these objects comes as much from the perception that the family will be distinguished by their acquisition of these highly desirable luxury goods - the opposite of what Bourdieu ascribes to the quality of distinction achieved through cultural acquisition of the dominant taste. The choice of the necessary therefore is not always limited to inexpensive goods, but can be cultivated, within the habitus, as a knowledge of particular luxury goods.

Almost every family had a VCR, Laser-disc, hi-fi and CD player. The duplication of rented laser discs is a serious pastime. In one family this required four VCR's (App.1, 4:1) and the equipment is very often the latest model with improved sound and visual qualities. The mother in Home 11 explained how the kids had all chipped in to buy a new TV set with Nicam facility because they enjoyed to sing along with the songs which they had duplicated from Karaoke discs.

To achieve the best position for viewing seating ideally should be positioned opposite the television but, residents often had no choice other than to place their seating at the furthest distance from the television, along a wall, and to view it sideways on. Most families had a sofa/sofabed or armchairs as the prime place for TV viewing. Home 6 had a traditional Chinese style sofa with cushions; while Home 9 had a hard modern bench, more commonly used in the seventies. In nearly every home the family would have folding or stacking stools to accommodate the extended family and visitors.

Unlike in the UK, for example, the concept of not being "on the phone" is almost unheard of in Hong Kong. In a one room flat where grown-up children have no space of their own they are able to maintain a personal sense of privacy through their own personal normal. In Home 11 the mother admitted she withdrew to her bedroom to watch television whenever the children were watching the English channels.

Lee Rainwater, Behind Ghetto Walls: Black Families in a Federal Slum, Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1970. p.103 Rainwater refers to the "unsympathetic observers" of the Pruitt Igoe ghetto who were appalled by the conspicuous presence of new expensive consumer products among families living on welfare. In 1965 when television was still fairly new 95% families had a television. It is even more striking that 68 per cent of households had telephones, and of these, 62 per cent had either color telephones or princess telephones despite the fact that such telephones cost more money. But they are colorful and "nice" and enliven what is often otherwise a rather barren decor. Other objects that serve to deny the pervasive sense of bare existence are expensive hi-fi sets.

Joseph Man Chan & Paul S.N. Lee, op. cit., This study carried out in 1990-1 73.3 per cent of the population had a VCR.

These were the narrow, wooden-armed, space-saving type rather than the big black squishy type usually found in middle class homes.
telephone line. The telephone provides a sense of withdrawing from the space, creating a mental space within a space\textsuperscript{36} hence the telephone is more than just a means of communication but also represents a form of personal space and a mechanism for coping with density. For added privacy people often phone friends late at night, masking their conversation from prying ears either with background music or noise from television. Home 7 had 4 telephones and two lines. The 11 year old child had her own line, because her friends would often call to ask about homework. Since local telephone calls are free and the rental of the line is inexpensive, the telephone is not viewed as a luxury object and people generally feel very comfortable about using it, without the worry of running up huge bills. In the same context nearly every Hong Kong student has a pager, and indeed, often their own mobile telephone. This is not necessarily seen as a luxury, or even as a status symbol, but as a necessary convenience to enable people to stay in communication with friends and family.\textsuperscript{37}

It is clearly important for the head of the family to be able to pursue his interests even where it occupies comparatively a lot of space in the home.\textsuperscript{38} (Plate 22) Keeping birds is a hobby and a tradition pursued by men from all walks of life\textsuperscript{39}. High-density living does not deter those who wish to keep birds as a hobby.\textsuperscript{40} It takes a lot of effort to look after the birds and there is clearly a lot of pleasure in doing so\textsuperscript{41}. In one of the most densely packed of all the homes, for example, the father kept three macaws, while his son kept a fairly large aquarium in the already crowded kitchen. His daughter observed: "We’re crowded, they’re crowded too".

\textsuperscript{36} Irwin Altman \textit{The Environment and Social Behavior}, Monterey, Calif: Brooks/Cole Publishing Co., 1975, p. 18

Irwin Altman cites Westin's four states of privacy: Solitude (being away from others), anonymity (being lost in a crowd), reserve (psychological separation) - all associated with the individual, but his fourth state, intimacy, concerns a group of people who wish to be out of range of contact from others. When someone is talking on the phone in the same space as others, they are still in contact with the group even though psychologically they have withdrawn and are focused elsewhere.

\textsuperscript{37} Fax machines are very common in Hong Kong households. At the time of the interview none of these families had a fax machine but this situation may well have changed.

\textsuperscript{38} One colleague's father kept 36 birds in a 300 sq. feet flat that was shared by 4 adults. These were kept in a selection of different cages - 10 birds in cages hanging up in the bathroom, others in a large cage on the balcony - some 4 feet high. The family did not mind, they were used to it. The mother's attitude was that it was a harmless hobby - better than having him gambling or drinking.

\textsuperscript{39} Hong Kong men can be seen carrying their birds outside for fresh air, to cafes or to the bird markets where they can share their interest with other like-minded individual's

\textsuperscript{40} The HKHA recently introduced a controversial rule which forbids families from keeping dogs in Public Housing flats. Families were given two weeks to get rid of their family pets or else face eviction. The rule does not apply to cats, fish, or birds.

\textsuperscript{41} Birds, must be fed fresh worms and grasshoppers. Male birds are prized for their singing. The mother in one family (PS3) who had recently moved into a new Trident block would not let her husband keep birds in the new flat until he had retired and thus more time to look after them. She complained that she had nowhere to hang the washing and the birds spotted the clothes. It was not the birds she minded but the up-keep. "If we had birds here, it'd be great, because the fresher the air the sweeter the songs of the birds.”
A mahjong table⁴² is a standard Hong Kong household fixture. When not in use it is usually placed near the door. It is a “space-intensive”⁴³ game that brings people together, played as a party, or as a quiet chat with friends. In Western terms, the social aspect of mahjong, lies somewhere between a coffee morning and a poker game. The game creates a familiar everyday background noise throughout Hong Kong and is played across all social stratas, age groups and by both sexes. It is a game played with neighbours and friends at social events and festive occasions, especially weddings. It can be played for money, or as “clean mahjong”. There are many different versions with different rules, and games have been known to go on for hours, even days at a time. Mahjong is such an everyday part of everyday life that people referred to it casually, almost incidentally as being part of their lives and their homespaces - “when we play mahjong”, as if it should go without saying that they would play mahjong at home. But to improve the game some families make a special effort to create the right environment using lighting referring casually to a specific fitting as a “mahjong light”.

Spatial Propriety

We don’t worship any gods. We have nothing like that. But sometimes we put flowers on the cupboard to the ancestors as offerings.⁴⁴

“Is it a shrine?” my research assistant asked, referring to a setting of two framed photographs invoking the recently deceased parents⁴⁵ It seemed a perfectly reasonable assumption to make. The clues appeared unmistakable, even to another cultural insider, yet they firmly denied that it was a shrine. (App.1, 5:2)

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⁴² Some mahjong tables can be reversed to be used as a dining table.
⁴⁴ Home 5
⁴⁵ Deborah Davies “My Mother’s House” in Perry Link, Richard Madsen & Paul G. Pickowitz (eds.) Unofficial China: Popular Culture and Thought in The People’s Republic, Colorado: Westview Press, 1989, p. 96. Davies remarked that in the Shanghai homes that she visited all the photos were recent - “usually a group photo at a wedding or birthday, or Chinese New Years Feast” - there was one exception which she claims reveals a “strong maternal influence over the domestic space”. In several apartments the only framed pictures were large black-and-white portraits of gaunt, elderly men and women. Some were photographs of the husband’s parents, but just as often they were a picture of the respondent’s mother taken soon before her death.
The first physical clue that we both had (incorrectly) read was the arrangement of oranges, stacked in a pyramid fashion, beside an elegant Chinese vase which was carefully placed on top of a cabinet below two framed photographs of deceased relatives. (Plate 31 & 32) The second clue was the overall formality of this setting. Everything on the cabinet seemed to be deliberately placed, and not so cluttered as other surfaces in the room. The consciously placed symmetrical arrangement clearly echoed a traditional altar setting reflecting a deep sense of propriety; a cohesive method that was not just about making things fit, but also knowing how to place them properly. Home 5 denied that this arrangement was a shrine, because, according to their personal folk model, it was not properly represented. In a similar vein, Home 12 had recently re-decorated the flat, opting for a light and bright minimalist environment. On one wall they had a black and white portrait of a parent or grandparent - with a smaller image tucked inside of the more recently deceased son. Below this was the VCR. A newspaper sheet was placed carefully on top (App.1, 12:3) with two Chinese cups positioned about one foot apart. Between these, placed further back was a single orange. It was not an altar. But it was clearly a discrete and reverential setting that had been neatly appropriated within the space and ordered in accordance with the same deep sense of spatial propriety.

This example highlights the (un)conscious manner in which space is created and interpreted. As Miller notes, this (mis)reading of an object or space has a lot to do with the social and cultural experience of the observer.

Societies have an extraordinary capacity either to consider objects as having attributes which may not appear as evident to outsiders. Or else altogether to ignore attributes which would have appeared to those same outsiders as being inextricably part of that object.47

As a cultural outsider I noticed it was common practice in many homes to place a wooden plank across the threshold, against the folding gate44. Every time someone went in or out of the flat the plank had to be re-positioned. The wooden plank had no intrinsic, or aesthetic, value and would probably not even have been recognised as legitimately part of the space. But, I was given two contradictory reasons for its presence. The first, was essentially practical: to prevent rats and mice, or dust and rubbish, or water from coming

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Laing traces the echo of the formal altar setting in peasant houses in China. The place of honour is "accentuated by means of a large scale central image or object surrounded by a symmetrical arrangement of objects". She suggests that often it is a mirror that becomes "the central element in the echoes of the ancestral altar".

44 Daniel Miller, op., cit., p. 109

44 This is usually in summer when the main door is left open and the gate is exposed to the corridor.
inside. The second, a more romantic concept: was to prevent the money from running out. When I asked various colleagues about this none of them appeared to have any knowledge of it. All except one. Based on her knowledge of fung-shui she volunteered that this practice is linked to the flow of the chi and derives from the practice of keeping evil spirits out similar to the high threshold of the Chinese temple. Which, then is the real reason? Or, can we in fact say that both reasons are correct. They may be subconsciously linked in residents' minds so that everyday spatial practices may mask a suppressed knowledge of which residents might not be conscious.

Certain objects clearly affect the way in which residents think about their placement which in turn, sets up different spatial arrangements within the space. Residents clearly applied different methods of placement appropriate to a certain object – in particular to cultural artefacts. For example, in the more traditionally minded homes square framed black and white portraits of the elderly are still fairly common. These images are frequently used in funeral rites and are strongly associated with the dead.⁴⁹ (Plate 31) People may go to a lot of trouble to carry on this tradition⁵⁰ of paying respect to their family members who have passed away. Even where this is not done consciously for formal religious reasons the presence of these images in the home is indicative of a traditional thinking family. The practice is less popular with younger families. It is likely that they are not so comfortable with these dark images as a focus within a modern domestic designed setting.⁵¹

In Home 6 the prominence of the altar setting (comprising framed images above a cloth covered table arranged with various religious utensils) conflicted with the father's denial of his religious devotion. He was, however, able to express his deeper knowledge of religious spatial propriety and respect for these objects even if he was not a "true Buddhist". (App.1, 6:2)

... I'm not a true Buddhist why? Because a real Buddhist will never put them like this. The most respected ones are underneath. That follows the practice of Buddhism. From the way I put up the posters, you can tell I'm not a Buddhist. I don't care. Nothing's special... I just burn the joss sticks."

⁴⁹ In Home 7 the portraits of the grandparents were prominently displayed even though the grandmother was still living.
⁵⁰ In one family the father had commissioned individual portraits of his parents taken from a family group shot.
⁵¹ A similar phenomenon can be found in parts of rural Ireland where even twenty years ago nearly everyone would have had the standard images of Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, the Pope and even John F. Kennedy. Nowadays, this tradition has largely died out. It would be unlikely to find such images displayed prominently in modern interiors.
⁵² Home 6
In every home one aspect of the space appeared to be appropriated through a more formal, or conscious method of placement. This is noticeable in the representation of religious objects but it also extends to objects of value, such as the television and, in the past, the wine/display cabinet. The living area might be ordered with the television as the focus but the artefacts surrounding the television will in turn also become a focus. From this prime display position these artefacts normally represent the family’s most cherished objects.

No matter how chaotic or untidy the space may look, or how disinterested people might seem in to be in the aesthetics or arrangement of their home each family took great pains in the placement of the lucky mottoes. (App.1, 1:1) Ironically, there are no formal “rules” for their placement yet they are always placed with care: symmetrical, centred and evenly balanced on the walls or door. (App.1, 7:3) The sense of propriety in placing and choosing these items is informed by a traditional knowledge of space. This method of decoration is common throughout most Hong Kong households over Chinese New Year though most families, especially in private dwellings, will remove them after a certain period. In public housing, and in traditional dwellings, they are more likely to stay up until the following year. For those who claim not follow folk religions or who are Christian the use of lucky mottoes in the home blurs the edges of culture, tradition, art and religion. Inscribed with meaningful sayings, these red paper strips are a strong decorative element in the space. The most common sayings are now mass produced and given out free by large Corporations, such as Banks (a marketing ploy promoting year long advertising) along with images of the god of wealth. The words “Happiness” and “Wealth” are usually pasted up side down to indicate that they luck has already come and normally placed top centre of the door way (outside and inside) or on a convenient vertical surface.

When I asked various friends about the rules for placing lucky mottoes people they did not think the rules were formal as such, but rather that it was common sense how they should be placed. It is of course only common sense to cultural insiders; to outsiders this knowledge appears to be bound up with the conscious model and a deep rooted sense of

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77 Ellen Johnston Laing, op. cit., p. 158
Laing refers to the organisation of the traditional Chinese upper class house where the scrolls hung in the ancestral altar were organised according to centralised symmetry.

In a formal system of this kind, the most important item is in the center, on the central axis. Secondary objects are ranged in balanced symmetry to either side. The static and stable arrangement serves to direct attention to the most important central object.

78 Ibid., p. 158. In nineteenth-century China, the strict rows of furniture, the centralised symmetrical arrangement of the centrepiece paintings along with their proper subject matter and representational style, and the brightly coloured, auspicious new year’s pictures provide visual
spatial propriety. It was important to many families that these mottoes should be present but as familiar elements in the space their presence was unremarkable.

Artistic Consumption

Hong Kong families are not noted for the love of art. That is not to say that there is no art, just that it might not be so obvious as art. If we extend the concept of art to embrace material culture, we see that there is a sense of decoration, and a particular aesthetic identity in the way these homes are represented. (App.1, 6:1)

Artistic consumption, as Bourdieu notes, demands a "pure pointless expenditure" of the most precious commodity of all - to those who have least of it, namely, time. If the pursuit of distinction relies heavily on time invested in its cultivation, this appears to be good explanation why Hong Kong people have shown little interest in art. It takes time to cultivate taste in art, which requires confidence beyond the pragmatics of, common sense. Most Hong Kong families work long hours and their free time is limited. Thus, leisure activities where the knowledge takes time to be cultivated - as Bourdieu notes, is considered to be expending valuable time to no purpose, whereas popular pleasures, such as karaoke, are more immediate and accessible to everyone.

The ideological Chinese cultural model places great value on art and in the creation of meaningful settings. The problem is that most Hong Kong people have had so little contact with art, quality materials or products, they lack the cultivated knowledge to be able to understand art and to develop a taste for it. It might be assumed that the knowledge applied to the placement of the lucky mottoes, for example, would apply to the placement of pictures. But there was very little evidence of framed art, where this did

evidence of a characteristic that was considered appropriate and correct in the decoration of the house.

Ellen Laing op. cit., p. 161


The objects endowed with the greatest distinctive power are those which most clearly attest the quality of the appropriation, and therefore the quality of their owner, because their possession requires time and capacities which, requiring a long investment of time, like pictorial or musical culture, cannot be acquired in haste or by proxy, and which therefore appear as the surest indications of the quality of the person.

exist it was positioned informally on the wall, and did not appear to be lined up or balanced with the same propriety, and consciousness of placement as the lucky mottoes.

One exception to this rule was Home 7. In the living area they displayed a very large Chinese style framed painting, which was given to the father by a friend. This was centrally placed on the wall and significantly, was balanced by even rows of lucky mottoes placed on either side. (App. 1, 7:1)

In the Chinese context it is often difficult to differentiate between what is a cultural or a religious artefact and what is art. Traditionally, certain Chinese statues may only have originally been used for religious purposes nowadays however these statues - Kuan yin, Kuandi\textsuperscript{a} and the Three Chinese Legends - of Fortune, Wealth and Longevity have been appropriated into the home as residents said, “just for display”. (App. 1, 10:1) Either way, as art, cultural or religious object, the placement of these artefacts - usually in a glass case - indicates that they are respected and treasured as an object and still command a degree of formal respect that was their due as religious objects. Thus, they are recontextualised, from religious object into art. But unlike other forms of art people do not buy it for its originality or rarity. As an artwork the religious meaning is never lost, everyone knows what and who these icons represent and, even if they are not vivified, there is still a deeper sense that their presence can bring good luck.

Residents mostly talked about art as decoration - as something that would make the space less boring. Home 3, for example, placed two wall hangings on the wall - for decoration mainly, but also to cover the marks on the wall after they had removed the ancestral tablets. (App. 1, 3:3) The most obvious example of this was the family photographs that adorned the walls, cabinets and bedsides. These are usually framed photographs of the whole family at a dinner, a family event or in a studio. In more traditional homes the style of framing and hanging usually meant the pictures had not been changed for some time. Typically, it might be a frame full of old and faded snapshots, tilted at an angle from the wall or placed within two wooden strips. (App. 1, 5:1)

Graduation photographs, at kindergarten and tertiary level are more recent phenomena and are more likely to be in smaller, plastic, colourful stand up frames, placed near, or on, the television. The parents’ wedding photograph might be displayed in the bedroom. One

\textsuperscript{a} The God of war must face the entrance “for demons and evil spirits do not dare enter into his presence”. He is the patron god of the military and restaurants, pawn shops, curio dealers of certain aspects of wealth and literature. Curiously he is also patron of the triads and the police - especially the C.I.D. The father in Home 10 was in the police force, the family kept an image of Kuandi in their shrine.
family admitted it was a bit old fashioned “a bit traditional” to display family photographs in this way. These displayed images may remain unchanged over the years. In this way, the memories of significant family events, of deceased family members and of the family at various lifestages helps to identify the family further with the home.

The Western pictorial calendar is commonly used as a strong decorative element in the home. Every home displayed a calendar. Most had more than one. Calendars are given out free by businesses (especially travel companies) and are prominently displayed - usually alongside a Chinese calendar. (App.1, 1:4) One, a Lunar calendar, the other Western - one to read the month, the other the day. The juxtaposition of these two calendars reinforces the idea of time, of dates, good luck, and the co-existence of Western and Chinese cultures from which local public holidays are derived.

Residents were more likely to place reminders of their past successes such as trophies and plaques and framed snapshots around the television - partly for show, partly because the television cabinet was designed for this purpose. Home 10, had an eclectic collection of images around the television: a framed jigsaw of a Swiss Alpine scene, a pop idol image, alongside various family photographs.

Behind glass, within a cabinet, residents would normally display prized elements of status, brandies, left over from a wedding together with various glasses and typically, a set of Western style China cups and saucers. Other knickknacks might include inexpensive ceramic dolls bought locally, or momentous from abroad. Home 4 made the comment that although the cabinet was for displaying ornaments and knickknacks (prestigious decorative items) they did not have any, so they used it instead for storing more everyday things. Bourdieu comments that this “taste for trinkets” stems from a lack of knowledge and experience of art objects which results in an intention of aiming for maximum effect for minimum cost. It is not unusual for families to display a ceramic piggy bank, silk flowers or a plastic Snoopy displayed alongside more everyday goods such as hand cream, VCR tapes and household clutter. (App.1, 9:3)

Probably the most ubiquitous “art piece” throughout all households was the Japanese Lucky Cat. In Japan this normally only ever be found in a shop window where it signifies good fortune. From Japan the practice was taken up by Hong Kong shopkeepers, where, for added luck they might have multiple cats arranged in various sizes. Now, every Hong Kong home has one and the concept has been recontextualised so that the Lucky Cat, with his paw raised, brings good fortune to the family home, in addition to its intrinsic qualities.
of adornment for the home. In Home 4 the Lucky Cat was placed facing the door. It was the first thing that visitors would see, and, from the manner in which it was placed it assumed almost religious significance. (App.1, 4:2)

**Intimate Space**

In the west, taste in the home is often applied through the decorative use of soft furnishings: cushions, curtains, wall-hangings, rugs and tablecloths. But in Hong Kong, which has high humidity in summer and a temperate climate in winter, fabrics do not feature so strongly within the décor. Flooring is, invariably either terrazzo tile, or more commonly linoleum or vinyl tile. In summer this may be washed down several times a day to keep the room cooler – and to facilitate those who prefer to sit on the floor. In the sixties, compared to homes of today, there was more extensive use of patterned fabrics, used as curtains around the bed, across shelves and as bedspreads. The place of fashion and trends, not normally attributed to high-density living, clearly exists. The current style today seems to be for plain finishes, with little or no pattern. Residents, as consumers make a whole range of choices and decisions in relation to their conception of popular tastes and styles but this is always within the habitus. Miller observes the contradictions within this phenomenon.

In obeying the dictates of style, it is the social being which takes responsibility for choice, yet there is simultaneously an area for personal strategy. Fashion then provides a surface which is partly expressive, but which also in part protects individuals from having to expose their taste in public. 97

Residents are reassured by following what they see as an accepted convention, without having to think up completely new ideas yet the element of decision-making within the habitus still gives them control over their environment.

Home 5 had decorated their living area with a distinctive patterned wallpaper. This gave the room a lively and decorative appearance. They admitted, however, that the wallpaper pattern was “old-fashioned.” It was, however, a style that was familiar to them from the past and was popular fifty years ago. This strong visual statement distinguished them from the more contemporary trends. But, their choice was not driven by aesthetics alone, they also confirmed that they wanted their home to be clean and tidy and easy to

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97 Daniel Miller, op., cit., p. 174
maintain, they admitted their reason for using wallpaper was, in keeping with the
habitus, in part a pragmatic solution.\(^6\)

Many residents articulated the importance of ensuring that the space was easy to
maintain, and dust-free.\(^4\) Day to day maintenance tends to be carried out by the mother.\(^6\)
In this way the housewife often builds a special relationship with the household objects,
through closer contact and routine. It is often in the details of placement that intimacy, or
lack of it, is revealed between the family, the object and the space. In Home 5, for
example, those objects valued above others - the computer, radio and telephone - were
covered by a cloth. (Plate 32) It is reasonable to assume that the mother, perhaps, unused
to these modern appliances, took pride in them drawing attention to them as cherished
objects, concerned that these things above others, derived special attention, and should
therefore be protected.\(^3\)

Rochberg-Halton found few class differences in the kinds of things people selected as
being special, whereas the age and gender of the individual was found to be more
significant in the type of objects they chose and cherished.\(^6\) Each family member had a
different interpretation of what was important to them within the home, and which things
they valued most. According to one study, carried out in the US, males referred more to
TV, stereo, sports equipment and trophies, while females mentioned photographs, plants,

\(^6\) Home 5 found that by using wallpaper they were able to save on re-decoration costs.
\(^4\) Various items, for example knickknacks, and silk flowers might be placed in a plastic bag to
protect them from dust. The protective plastic might be left on seating to further protect it from
deterioration so that the seat remained a good as new – under the plastic. Several homes covered
their washing machines with a special plastic cover.
\(^3\) See also Sunday Morning Post, 2/8/97. A survey carried out by the Equal Opportunities
Commission found that women were still expected to do the lion’s share of chores. Up to 68% said
that wives were responsible for household tasks such as shopping, cooking and cleaning. Up to
70.5% said that child-related activities such as supervising homework, meeting teachers and
choosing primary schools fell to the mother. About 54% said husbands were responsible for
maintaining and repairing household appliances although 40% said that the father controlled the
family economy. The survey also found that there was a strong sense of equality between male and
female children which suggests that with the next generation the situation is likely to change.
\(^6\) Gaston Bachelard op. cit., p. 68

Objects that are cherished in this way really are born of an intimate light, and they
attain to a higher degree of reality than indifferent objects, or those that are
defined by geometric reality. For they produce a new reality of being, and they
take their place not only in an order but in a community of order. From one object
in a room to another, housewifely care weaves the ties that unite a very ancient
past to a new epoch. The housewife awakens furniture that was asleep.

\(^4\) Eugene Rochberg-Halton, “Object Relations, Role Models and Cultivation of the Self”,
Environment and Behavior, vol. 16, no. 3 May 1984, pp. 335-368, In Rochberg-Halton’s study carried
out among American households, children were found to be attached to objects that required some
physical manipulation - stereos, musical instruments, pets, sports equipment, vehicles, refrigerators
and stuffed animals. Grandparents chose things that allowed contemplation - photographs, books,
paintings, sculpture, silver ware.
glass, textiles. Women referred more to the significance of memories and associations with immediate family, than men. In respect, to the category of objects they valued most, it was found that women had more in common with grandparents, and men with children.

Residents become more familiar with their home through dwelling but they are also likely to lose the objective awareness of the home as space, and the capacity to see it objectively or to be conscious of growing shabbiness. Economics obviously affects how much money people can spend on the home and the quality of materials that they will use. But it can also make people more resourceful. In Home PS2, for example, the father had the idea to switch the floor tiles after they became worn out. In an everyday situation tenants' ability to frame a problem and to develop a workable response to the solution might be addressed by reflection-in-action, through improvisation. Everyday problem-solving relies on familiar rules, procedures and techniques of tacit knowing, or common sense. This restricts the recognition, reflection and articulation of the problem by framing it within an everyday social and cultural knowledge but, as Schön points out, past experience brings a lot to bear in any problem-solving activity.

It is our capacity to see unfamiliar situations as familiar ones, and to do in the former as we have done in the latter, that enables us to bring our past experience to bear on the unique case. It is our capacity to see-as and do-as that allows us to have a feel for problems that do not fit existing rules.46

Most of the everyday solutions that people adopted were based on common sense, ad hoc, methods of dealing with a problem at hand.

Yes, because the wall behind is very ....you see, very dirty, so...we are too lazy to put wall paper on it, so we hang a curtain to protect the wall from getting dirty.47

These solutions are represented according to what makes sense to residents and the context in which they have framed the problem - that is, with a view to how much effort (and expense) they are willing to put into solving the problem. Through long-term dwelling, the majority of people will over time, add to the existing layers of the space, adding new items of furniture, changing worn out materials and perhaps re-arranging the space as new appliances are introduced.


47 Pilot Study 2
Some families are not concerned with anything other than day to day problem solving. So long as they are comfortable with the space it does not matter to them how it looks or functions. In the case of Home 1, the family was aware of the problems within the space but they had not found an easy solution and, in reality, were clearly not that frustrated by the situation to be sufficiently motivated to do anything about it. The changing habitus is however, affecting the way many Hong Kong people, especially the younger generation, think about their home. There were several examples in this study indicating that parents are letting their grown-up children to take more control. Younger people appear to be more confident in their ability to create a home that reflects the changing taste of the habitus and in articulating this in terms of design ideas. But in acquiring and developing design knowledge residents are not so concerned with invention or originality, but in practicality and aesthetics. They want it to look good, but to be functional. They “obey the dictates of style” but want to feel engaged in making the “right” decisions.

Some time after the interviews took place, Home 2 invited us back to their home to see their newly completed renovations. They were enthusiastic to talk about the decisions they had made (in conjunction with the contractor) and they were visibly proud of their “new” home.

The flat was re-decorated with special attention to detail: a newly formed white painted arched doorway replaced the old utilitarian bedroom door. They built new louvred partitions and wardrobes for the bedrooms and new velvet tasseled drapes replaced the old curtains in the living area. Even the wedding photograph hanging in the parents’ bedroom was re-hung and re-framed in a more contemporary style. And, in the living room the family had bought a new television cabinet to house their new, bigger television. (Plate 33)

The family’s social mobility was clearly reflected in the design of their home, but also in the way that they talked about design, which they expressed in terms of style and taste. Previously they had complained about the density and the untidy build up of clutter on the chairs and around the door. After re-modelling the flat they appeared to have solved that problem, or were more careful how they looked after the space. But the most striking thing about their re-decoration was how it conformed to the current co-ordinated fashion in design represented in local decorating magazines. Before the decoration it was eclectic, after decoration, it was cohesive. They were excited and confident about discussing their new knowledge of design and it clearly made a difference not only to how they felt about their home but to their way of living.
Miller contends that a theory of housing has to be largely a "theory of consumption". But it is more than that. In this context residents' ability to appropriate the space is not just about their consumption status, but their ability to think about space, their motivation to solve design problems, their knowledge of design in other domestic contexts and above all, what they see as being important within a home. Density is a factor, but the diversity of spatial interpretation within these homes proves that there are other, more legitimate values affecting the appropriation of space. Traditional cultural values, for example, have been visibly adapted to the high-density living environment. We might see a small shrine on top of a refrigerator and lucky mottoes hanging from a conduit. (App.1, 2:3) These are also represented less obviously: fluorescent lighting, VSOP brandy, a Danish biscuit tin, a plastic bag covering silk flowers. Density also creates interesting juxtapositions: a refrigerator or dressing table placed next to a television cabinet, a bed next to the front door, everyday foodstuffs in a display cabinet, an aquarium beside the cooking stove.

Home 12 would be likely to be judged by many designers to be a good design response on account of its minimal, tidy and cohesive qualities. (App.1, 12:1) But not every Hong Kong family would want to be, or could be, so disciplined in their consumption practices. Design as practical problem solving, assumes different forms. Home PS2 had inventively solved their needs with folding screens while Home 2 had completely re-modelled their home with a new aesthetic. Home 11 had the most eclectic assemblage of furniture and finishes yet it still worked as a space and they felt they had already done quite a lot to it. Not every family had a clear idea about what they wanted from the space. Home 3 felt so much "at home" that they did not feel the need to stand back, and reflect on the space - in their mind, it was "big enough" and suited their needs. Home 8, showed that high-density problems cannot always be resolved but rather than demonstrating any obvious pathological problems they showed that it is possible for people to adapt to and tolerate, even very difficult spatial conditions.

It is apparent from this study is that it is increasingly difficult to make generalisations about the Hong Kong home. Each home functions adequately to suit residents' basic needs, though some residents are clearly aspiring for more than this and are developing domestic tastes far beyond the utilitarian nature of the building design. The spaces may be identical, but the representation and quality of space can vary considerably. This study has highlighted the representational quality of lived space, which, as Lefebvre describes,

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68 At Chinese New Year when relatives go visiting they often give Danish biscuits as a present. The tin will be re-used by the family to store things. These tins appeared in quite a number of homes.
"need obey no rules of consistency or cohesiveness".

Through the imposition of density Hong Kong residents break conventional rules of design. As spaces they are sometimes chaotic and irrational yet, at the same time, can be challenging and provocative. There is no disputing the legitimacy of these spaces, but it is only with an open mind and appropriate insight that they should be judged.

*Henri Lefebvre, op. cit., p. 41*
CONCLUSION
Changing Spaces

Writing five years after these interviews were conducted, Hong Kong has witnessed a phenomenal growth of interest in domestic space, design and decoration. Given this tremendous shift in the way the Hong Kong home is constructed, interpreted and produced, the homes and voices within this study must be situated within a particular time and place. While density, high land prices and the ever-growing population remain fundamental concerns in Hong Kong what is significant within this study is how, amidst the flux of change, everyday perception and experience of these concerns has also changed.

As we have seen, for public housing residents of 1992, several major factors have contributed to the transformation of the Hong Kong home. First, the introduction of an improved building design, within the HKHA stock of housing has given residents a new concept of quality in domestic space. This was made possible by the increase in the public housing space allocation which, in turn, gave residents more spatial scope and the opportunity to create a home with different rooms and proper bedrooms. Secondly, for many long-term residents of Government housing, once their children have grown up, or moved out they find they will have more space, more disposable income, and the opportunity to re-model their home. Thirdly, Hong Kong consumers today have a much wider choice of furniture, fittings and lighting than existed even a few years previously - or could ever have been imagined thirty years ago. There are also many more home-decorating magazines flooding the market, and a glut of new shops catering for, and feeding this consumer demand. Hong Kong people are now much more exposed to design than before and are in a better position to consider design as part of their lives. Significantly, this affects not only the private sector but also public housing tenants emerging as a new middle class.

It has been argued that Hong Kong is a culture of density and a way of life. In Hong Kong the scale of the home does not necessarily reflect income, status or education, it is taken for granted that the typical Hong Kong homespace is small - much smaller than typical homes in the West. However, discourse on "density" and "space" tend to be judged in Western terms where density is regarded as an exceptional phenomenon, rather than an everyday spatial experience. It is also assumed that the opportunities to design are dependent on the quality of space and that design in high density must therefore be a
compromise. This assumption about the nature of designing in density has gone unchallenged, or, rather, it has been overlooked.

Density

To date there has been little consideration how residents have managed to cope so well with this form of high-density living or indeed, any exploration of the way these high density Hong Kong homes function as a centre of family life. Historically, issues concerning density have been limited by the basic assumption that density creates crowding, which is considered to be a negative subjective experience. While it is evident that laboratory tests on animals, which claim knowledge of the effects of density on humans, loses sight of the complexity of human spatial experience most studies of Hong Kong density have indicated that there is little evidence to support the pathology of density argument in Hong Kong. According to Freedman, crowding is a psychological state, it is a subjective experience that refers to a “feeling” of having little space, rather than something that is actually physical or measurable. With his “density-intensity” theory Freedman claims that crowding “serves to intensify the individual’s reactions to the situation” and that the sensation of being crowded is largely dependent on what the individual considers to be a normal space. He concludes thus:

First high density (crowding) does not have generally negative effects on humans it does not produce any kind of physical, mental, or social pathology...Second, high density does have effects on people, but these effects depend on other factors in the situation....density does have important predictable consequences which are neither always negative or always positive. 

A major factor contributing to Hong Kong people’s tolerance of density clearly lies with a deep-rooted conception that, topographically land is difficult to develop, that developable land is valuable and that high density, high-rise living is the norm. As Rapoport points out, a virtually homogeneous population will have a greater tolerance of density than a heterogeneous population in an equivalent density elsewhere and a homogeneous crowd

1 Jonathan L. Freedman, Crowding and Behavior, San Francisco: W.H. Freeman and Co. 1975
2 Ibid., p.7

Like Freedman, Rapoport’s redefinition of density hinges on the concept of the “negative subjective experience” found in both low and high levels of crowding. He too dismisses the simple ratio model since it is clearly inadequate to “predict either behavioral or subjective consequences”. The two major aspects of perceived density, physical and social must somehow be related since they affect awareness of other people. As a homogeneous population, Hong Kong peoples’ experience and knowledge of space, as high density space, clearly affects their spatial perception and response.
density than a heterogeneous population in an equivalent density elsewhere and a homogeneous crowd can disregard others more easily because they take for granted certain cues of interaction and behaviour. Therefore the fundamental spatial concern, at least for a designer, must be the question how high-density space functions not just in terms of spatial occupation but is perceived as a lived-in space. Rapoport advocates that density should be "read" through the specificity of physical and social relationships before it can be judged. In other words, in this context, if we are to better understand how, as a virtually homogeneous population, Hong Kong people cope with density, we must learn to identify and appreciate how these cues of interaction and behaviour affect the way they think of space and how these are implicit in the experience of that space.  

Reconceptualising Post-Occupancy Studies

The problem with most post-occupancy studies as Gutman and Westergaard point out, is that they tend to be carried either by architects or for architects. The main concern of the architect is to determine how the building "fulfills the functions it was intended to serve", that is, to test the performance of the building, and the design of the space in order to evaluate where the user was satisfied with the design. In such studies, the architect is evaluating the design for the purpose of learning more about design, with the ultimate aim to improve design capabilities and to enable this knowledge to be passed on.

Rapoport points out that a designer cannot directly affect or manipulate crowding, as a subjective experience:

> What they can do is to control density in its traditional meaning, and if the relation of this is to perceived density is known, and the relationship between perceived density and feelings of crowding or isolation understood, then these latter feelings may become more predictable and might possibly be affected by manipulating perceived density.

With more specific knowledge about a particular spatial context, a designer will be better equipped to predict how Hong Kong people respond to other people "through all the senses and, directly or through physical cues, a consciousness of the sharing of spaces and facilities, as well as cultural and physical 'defenses' which control this awareness of others."

Gutman and Westergaard outline some of the inherent difficulties in evaluation studies:

> the lesser importance of the built environment relative to other factors in user satisfaction; the primitivism of theoretical notions about man-environment relations; the large degree of personal variation found in response to the built environment; the need to specify whose satisfaction is being talked about; the need to specify the point of time at which the evaluation is made; and the establishment of the proper unit to evaluate.
to other designers. But what the architect is actually testing in these studies is, fundamentally, the architect's belief in architectural determinism. And, while it might be thinly veiled as an investigation into user behaviour, the major concern starts with the building form and the influence of the building on the residents - rather than the residents' interpretation of space.

It is taken for granted that post-occupancy studies should be reviews of architecture, not interior design, and that it is normally the spatial occupation rather than the spatial appropriation that is critically evaluated. This makes the assumption that the user's spatial choices are limited to physicality without considering the context in which an object might be selected and placed in the space. It pre-supposes that the user's ideas are determined by the space rather than their social, cultural or economic outlook. It also negates the user's own sense of design, specifically interior design, within the representation of space. Clearly there is a problem with the way in which designers conceive of the user. As Proshansky observes:

It is my contention that most architects, designers and planners have a wealth of 'unrefined' data and ideas about people in relationship to physical space and its organisation this has yet to be tapped in any systematic fashion.

Proshansky suggests that failures in design could be avoided if a designer's knowledge is "programmed" with help from the behavioural sciences. In an ideal world this might be the best scenario for every design project. But, realistically even with occasional support from a multi-disciplinary team the problem still exists as to how the designer - architect/planner/interior designer working alone can bridge, or incorporate, the user's conceptualisation of space, towards a design solution.

Gutman and Westergaard propose that if architects are genuinely concerned with user satisfaction, in developing standards they must somehow be able to take into account "the terms in which the users think about the environment". They point out that the design field needs to develop more sophisticated theory and information about the context of the user's thinking. Clearly, this would require a shift within design research to consider the user as someone who does not merely respond to space but as someone who thinks about space. To take this further, the fact that the user has a knowledge of space, which is also a legitimate design knowledge, needs to be highlighted and should be a prime consideration within the design process.

Harold Proshansky, "Environmental Psychology and the Design Professions" in Jon Lang et al, op. cit., p.79
But if the potential richness of design data within post-occupancy studies appears to have been restricted, if not lost, through various research methods, then clearly the method needs to be re-examined. Perhaps one of the problems with existing design methods is the fact that post-occupancy research studies have been largely restricted to the architectural profession. As reluctant researchers, interior designers have been professionally disadvantaged by a lack of literature in the field. This has led to a dependence on architectural models, the assumption being that the process, and therefore the methods, must be similar. Interior designers are normally concerned with the appropriation of a contained space. It is in the nature of dealing with small spaces, especially residential design, that designers normally develop a close understanding of client/space relationship. But if interior design knowledge is to be made useful the differences between the way in which an architect and interior designer are "programmed" to design need to be articulated. Then we might have a better understanding of what Proshansky refers to as "unrefined data" that is implicit in the process of designing and to reconsider how this could be more clearly articulated within post-occupancy research.

Design Knowledge in The Home.

One of the problems highlighted in this research study has been to consider how a designer might interpret how users "think" about where they live and to consider this knowledge of high density living not only as a legitimate spatial knowledge, but as a design knowledge. As Schön observed, design thinking is often spontaneous, based on intuitive performance rather than conscious thought. And, since it is ordinarily tacit and implicit in our actions it is difficult to make verbally explicit. It is consequently much more difficult to identify, or interpret as design knowledge.

Within this study it has been argued that design knowledge in high density housing is physically evidenced through the residents' ability to organise space. As we have seen,


Schön notes how, even in the "spontaneous, intuitive performance of the actions of everyday life, we show ourselves to be knowledgeable in a special way." But this knowledge is ordinarily tacit. It is knowing in our action. A professional designer might, for example, respond to an everyday design problem without being conscious of the processes they are engaged in or the decisions they have made. In the same context, a non-professional may be engaged in everyday organisation of the space yet be unable to explain their rationale or thinking. It appears that this knowledge of
the ability, and method of spatial organisation varies from family to family. It does not appear to be restricted by the building form, or physical density alone. Indeed, there are much more significant factors affecting the appropriation of the domestic space: the number and age of the inhabitants, cultural attitude, education, interest in design or DIY, exposure to different types of designed environments, consumer trends influenced by the media, shops, neighbours and relatives.

Design knowledge and decision-making is clearly articulated where there has been a conscious reflection of problem-solving or of a spatial problem that has been, at some point, considered. Residents, however, might not articulate this directly as design knowledge but rather as everyday knowledge of coping with high-density space. This might be physically represented through the adoption of particular spatial conventions and verbally expressed as common sense. But as Geertz points out, a taken for granted knowledge is a knowledge that is specific to a culture. In this context, residents might describe their ability to cope with density in terms of a stated preference for example: “convenience” in layout, bright lighting, the use of large full-height cupboards or the best position for the television. It was also a common strategy, built into the everyday family routine, to maximise the space potential through the use of flexible or folding furniture and a temporal use of space.

But is one of the complexities within this knowledge that it is constantly changing. Before there is any design intervention there are different limits set by residents in terms of time, effort, expense and disruption to the household. These limits are often dependent on how closely residents relate to the home as a reflection and representation of the family and self. In Hong Kong the rapidly changing social pattern has created very different spatial, psychological and cultural experiences. Younger people, for example, raised in very different social and economic circumstances from their parents, do not share the same fatalistic attitude to housing, design and space. Nor do they share the same consumer attitude, spatial values, and cultural consciousness.

"knowing more than we can say" prevents us from articulating what we know because it is implicitly linked to our actions.


Geertz treats common sense as an organised body of considered thought and argues that it is a cultural system. He explains that one of the difficulties of considering common sense as a knowledge is that it is an “inherent characteristic of common sense thought to deny this and to affirm that its tenets are immediate deliveries of experience, not deliberated reflections of it.” The “naturalness” of common sense, as an air of “of course-ness” as “the ways things go” is assumed as a common knowledge of the ways things are because it is assumed, and therefore goes without saying that it is what everyone knows. This makes it all the more difficult to articulate or identify as knowledge, and as an aspect of design knowledge.
The Hong Kong family is caught up in the changing world and experiences. Family members might live in the same high-density space, but inhabit quite different spatial worlds. As Bourdieu⁹ observes, these social dispositions are represented through a practical knowledge of this world within the habitus. It is evident there is a transformation from traditional spatial values of order in the home towards new social and spatial values. One of the keys to identifying design knowledge is to acknowledge how an individual’s thinking is affected by traditional spatial values in the face of shifting ideals of domestic space, design and consumption. For example, it appears that long-term, older residents are more likely to appropriate space, and to articulate their knowledge of space, in accordance with traditional values affecting the placement of cultural artefacts, selection of furniture, materials and lighting. In such homes there is likely to be evidence of specific cultural practices - a shrine, ancestor worship, lucky mottoes. But Hong Kong overall, has a relatively young population and, it appears, younger people tend to perceive the appropriation of domestic space more in terms of design than tradition. They identify more closely with Western concepts of domestic space articulated in terms of privacy, style, aesthetics and comfort and they appear to have more confidence in representing their design choices through custom-made furniture and a more decorative use of lighting.

As public housing residents consciously move away from a utilitarian styled environment we can see how, as practitioners of space, they are more able to articulate their knowledge in terms of design. Since they are unlikely to have any direct contact with professional designers their only other contact with a professional practitioner of design is more likely to come from contractors and shopkeepers. Contractors offer more than just practical assistance and advice, they are an immediate design interface between residents and their homespace. And, as there is not yet any sign of an emerging DIY culture in Hong Kong the role of the contractor is likely to assume greater importance in domestic design, as a promoter of popular taste and style. The relationship between contractor and resident presents an another facet of amateur/professional design knowledge that would be a worthwhile follow-on study to this project, to further explore design consciousness within the domestic sphere. There is also potential for further research into the development of local design within the furniture industry to examine more closely how this has contributed to make design choices more accessible to the Hong Kong public.

Cultivating Design Insights

This study attempts to re-conceptualise post-occupancy studies within interior design by focusing attention on the user’s knowledge of space and the way in which this is articulated and interpreted as design knowledge. By promoting design as an intellectual inquiry it provides an insight into design thinking as a way of interrogating the world.

Within design pedagogy there is still remains the issue of how to bridge the gap between amateur and professional design knowledge. It has not been generally recognised, even by designers that the outcome of a reflective practice does not necessarily have to result in a design product. Design knowledge is a transferable knowledge that can be used to provide insight into a changing habitus. It can facilitate an appreciation of interior design as a way of thinking about lifestyle and culture for amateur and professional alike.

One of the problems within interior design has been the lack of appropriate theoretical and academic positions from which to view professional knowledge - which, consequently has either been taken for granted or ignored. But if spatial theory is to develop it must broaden its approach to design. It needs to accept the legitimacy of a range of spatial thinking and interpretation. This needs to be addressed first of all in design pedagogy so that designers can build up the confidence to be able to question assumptions within their professional design knowledge by recognising the legitimacy of different forms of design knowledge.

From this study it is clear that if interior design students are made more conscious of their own acquisition of design knowledge they should be better equipped to reflect on how design relates to the users’ everyday experience. Through this method of conducting post-occupancy space designers should be able to “read”, articulate and respond to different forms of spatial design knowledge. Thus, the design insight that is implicit within professional design knowledge can be made more explicit in the research process.

This form of design research formulates a useful strategy for re-conceptualising interior design within a reflective practice. By cultivating an appreciation of everyday design knowledge the spatial context of dwelling can be better understood, so that ultimately post-occupancy studies can become more meaningful and applied across all forms of domestic space.
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