

Barrie Shelton, Justyna Karakiewicz, & Thomas Kvan. (2011). *The Making of Hong Kong: From Vertical to Volumetric*. Abingdon, UK & New York, USA: Routledge. 184 pp. £105 (hardcover), ISBN 978-0-4154-8701-6

This book offers an overview of the development of Hong Kong's urban morphology from the time just before British colonial settlement to the contemporary era. Emphasis is placed on exploring the 'volumetric' aspect of the city, a concept defined by the authors as encompassing both 'verticality' (the upward and downward extension of infrastructure) and 'intensity' (the ability for a site to accommodate a sense of dynamism that comes from having a variety of functions across multiple levels/floors, and from the connections that can form between different sites). These themes are explored throughout the eight chapters of the book.

The introduction contains the conceptual framework, setting the tone for the entire volume. By comparing the urban density found in American and European cities, the authors effectively illustrate the extreme density of Hong Kong. They argue that Hong Kong defies dominant attitudes within the urban planning profession, which sees density as an undesirable trait associated with urban decay. Instead, the authors suggest that urban density is perhaps the form all cities should consider using in the future, as it could be a solution to the environmental and demographic challenges we currently face. Furthermore, in noting how Hong Kong's extensive use of land reclamation technologies to enable construction on difficult (and limited) terrain has created a scenario where the city's population "must live their daily lives almost entirely 'in suspension'" and removed from "nature's ground" (p. 161), the authors call for an increased sensitivity towards how 'ground' should be conceptualised and defined in urban design and theory.

Chapters 2-5 provide a chronological account of the changing infrastructural forms that have emerged in Hong Kong. The nascent beginnings of the colony, along with the eventual growth and expansion (horizontally and vertically) of the city, are featured in Chapters 2 and 3. Emphasis is placed on examining walled villages and the shop-house, traditional building types found across the Asian region that influenced later architectural forms in the city. In particular, from looking at the shop-house in the early settlement of Victoria on Hong Kong Island and also on the Kowloon peninsula, it is observed that verticality has always been a characteristic of the city (even if these early structures did not reach the heights witnessed today) and that spaces in these buildings have always been designed to accommodate a variety of functions stacked on top of each other. Chapter 4 covers the years surrounding World War II, the pivotal decades that led to massive redevelopment of the existing urban landscape accompanied by a dramatic increase in the height and mass of buildings, whereas Chapter 5 deals with the transformation of Hong Kong into a 'World City' dominated by skyscrapers from the 1980s onwards.

These first few chapters show that whilst changes to Hong Kong's urban landscape are the result of colonial government influence, this institutional intervention has always assumed

a reactive stance towards the challenges (of rapid population growth and natural disasters) the city faced, as opposed to having officials innovate the landscape “with foresight” (p. 79). As a result of this relatively passive approach, instead of introducing and imposing radical new forms of urbanity to the territory, the colonial government made use of existing urban styles and spatial practices found amongst the Hong Kong Chinese population (e.g. the idea of ‘stacking’ commercial, residential, and industrial spaces in post-WWII buildings is a principle adopted from the shop-house). Thus, rather than claim that the urban morphology of Hong Kong is solely the product of colonial government construction projects and ordinances, the authors appreciate that the city we see today is the product of a syncretic dynamic between the colonial government and the Hong Kong Chinese population of yesteryear.

The second half of the book contains specific examples of how ‘volumetric’ practices currently manifest in the city. The emergence and evolution of the podium-and-tower structure, Hong Kong’s current “signature building type” (p. 112), is described in Chapter 6. Chapter 7 returns to the question of ‘rethinking ground’ discussed in the first chapter, using a broad list of everyday facilities found in the city (e.g. schools and churches, rooftop gardens, tiered modes of transportation, pathways/routes of transience) that have been stacked and elevated to show how different types of ‘ground’ can exist, bringing the narrative of the book full-circle. Chapter 8 concludes the book, with the authors reiterating the viability of using Hong Kong’s urban density as a model for other cities in the future.

What sets the last three chapters apart from the rest of the book is that they also look at the problems such ‘volumetric’ designs in Hong Kong can pose. The authors’ critique is directed primarily towards newer podium-and-tower buildings, stating that whilst they can serve as nodes facilitating connectivity and movement in the city, they also risk becoming ‘urban islands’ (p. 124), disconnected and isolated from adjacent neighbourhoods, creating a fragmented urban landscape (echoing the literature on Los Angeles enclaves, see: Davis, 1990). Although the authors state that their interest here is primarily on Hong Kong’s physical morphology, their criticisms of the ‘volumetric’ manifestations in the city could benefit from reviewing the subjective *experiences of density* espoused by the contemporary Hong Kong population. How do people feel about living in dense conditions? Do they see it as a desirable model of urban living in the future? These are questions worth addressing, especially with Hong Kong residents increasingly developing an aversion to the cramped conditions of the city (Chan, 2010; Chen, 2012).

Other things to consider would be the influence of the political domain in influencing the Hong Kong urban condition. Even though the transition from the colonial period to the Special Administrative Region (SAR) era in 1997 is noted near the end of Chapter 5 (p. 104), little is said about the new government’s approach towards urban development. In response to the Asian Financial Crisis in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the SAR administration adopted an economic model that relies on continuous infrastructural construction (Poon, 2011) and

has rapidly auctioned off land to a select number of private developers, who employ a homogenous design model for their projects, which have propagated the 'urban island' phenomenon criticised by the authors. Furthermore, now that Hong Kong is under the sovereignty of the People's Republic of China (PRC), there has been much more cross-border movement (in trade and tourism), which is gradually dictating what sort of infrastructural projects will appear in the city.

Engagingly written and organised in a highly legible manner, this book provides a vastly informative guide to the distinctive morphology of Hong Kong (covering a range of topics, from geological features to post-World War II economic shifts in the territory). Praise must be given to the plethora of images and diagrams used, which enrich the text and convey the authors' familiarity and expertise with the Hong Kong urban environment. It is perhaps in the Addendum that the strength of this book comes through, with the authors offering a glimpse of how being aware of 'volumetric' principles in design can potentially contribute to rejuvenating old neighbourhoods (e.g. Mong Kok) or positing a new form of environmentally sensitive living (e.g. the Kwu Tung 'Naturbia') in Hong Kong. Authored from the perspective of urban planners and architects, this book will be of value to anyone who wishes to garner a better understanding of the compact qualities of Asian urbanity or is interested in the creative spatial innovations that can occur in island cities where land is a finite resource.

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