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# Introduction

Hazel Clark

Devoting this issue to design in Hong Kong draws attention to the fact that so called "marginal" cultures must now play a part in any consideration of design in the world. Not only to redress a still prevailing Euro-American dominance of the discourse, but, also as the following pages indicate, because in these cultural "margins" reside powerful resonances of and for the mutual "other." Thus the papers, in speaking about Hong Kong, address issues which have significance far beyond the territory, both geographically and intellectually.

Seen here from the perspective of the 1990s, Hong Kong is a global city, like others, facing the unforeseen challenges of the millennium, but also it is a city caught within its own history, experiencing the change in its sovereignty from Britain to Mainland China. During a century of British rule, it had developed from a "barren rock" to an international center of manufacturing, business, and banking. Yet beneath this veneer of commercial and economic success dwelled an anxiety—one that simultaneously enabled but potentially undermined much that had been achieved.

The years following the 1984 signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration, which sanctioned the "handover," highlighted the complexity of Hong Kong. An international city and a colony with an the impending change into a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of China brought urgency to the need to establish and represent its own identity. This was no simple task; a century of colonialism had produced some unusual, and paradoxical features in the cultural space of Hong Kong. Ackbar Abbas has astutely identified Hong Kong as "not so much a place as a space of transit," a doorway for people and trade, where everything "floats"—currencies, values and human relations.[1] The erasure of the colonial space, by, what many saw as, an alien identity, brought, what Abbas terms, "a kind of last-minute collective search for a more definite identity." In this task of self-identification design had a significant role to play.

Seeking identity through design was not new in Hong Kong. Efforts had been made to do so in the 1920s and 30s, but they were not sustained. The mid century development of the manufacturing sector was dependent on export and on adaptive design, fostered under the OEM (Overseas Equipment Manufacture) system. Design became regarded as a Western import, a symbol of modernity and "good taste," which, by implication, had to be brought in from the outside. This was not without benefits. In the late 1960s, the arrival

1 Ackbar Abbas *Hong Kong. Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*, (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1997), 4–6.

of a number of designers from overseas helped to establish the design profession and design education.

Professional design was established first in visual communication, with the contribution of Henry Steiner and others.[2] Hong Kong's bilateral culture became represented in the "East meets West" paradigm. Alan Chan, one of the territory's most renowned graphic designers, described his winning design for the 1997 Hong Kong Designers Association annual awards:

The yellow and red "Lipton" label hangs on the end of a string over the side of a steaming teacup. A more traditional English image is hard to find, except the small white teacup which has no handle; it is a Chinese cup containing a Western incarnation of the ancient drink.[3]

But the "East meets West" strategy, innovative though it can be, provides only a "one-dimensional" characterization of Hong Kong design.

The authors of the papers in this issue were all involved in design and design education in Hong Kong in the 1990s. Some were long term residents, others shorter-term visitors, but each contributes an individual perspective, drawn from their shared experience of the colony before, during and after the handover. Then, as of course now, Hong Kong's "bigger picture" is China—and that is where our issue, begins, as it must. To establish the China context, I asked Clive Dilnot to revisit a paper he presented to an industrial design conference in Beijing in 1995.

Dilnot reminds us that we cannot see Hong Kong in isolation from the Mainland. With its international contacts and experience, Hong Kong is China's most logical "design center." As a conduit into the global economy, Hong Kong can help China achieve the three scenarios for design that Dilnot projects. But to do this, Hong Kong design practice must change. What Dilnot calls "the Hong Kong model" is one that trivializes and operationalizes the role of the designer. Cecilia Chu corroborates this view in representing the collective frustration of Hong Kong interior designers faced with growing pressures, exacerbated by the Asian economic downturn. She sees interior design as a profession that has been marginalized so much that it lacks the authority to fulfill its proper potential. Chu warns that unless professional design is more valued in Hong Kong, it will face serious competition from the Mainland.

Architects, Gutierrez + Portefaix, on the other hand, write not about the operational aspects of their profession, but about its innovative ways of addressing the paradoxes of contemporary China, the collision of communism and capitalism, within the urban density and connectivity of Hong Kong. Ezio Manzini shares their view that there are valuable lessons to be learned from observing the urban and cultural space of Hong Kong. Manzini advocates close examination of this dense urban culture to provide the key for "new forms of life" engendered by culturally hybrid ways of living,

2 Henry Steiner and Ken Haas, *Cross-Cultural Design: Communicating in the Global Marketplace* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1995).

3 Alan Chan, *South China Morning Post,* November 3, 1996.

predicated on the high density and connectivity of the population along with its cross-cultural character. Hong Kong is offered as a "laboratory of the future" where sustainable solutions may be sought as models for other, similarly complex, urban environments.

Tony Fry also looks through Hong Kong to the future. For Fry Hong Kong was a literal and metaphoric "port of entry" to Chinese culture. He sees it not simply as a binary culture, but more as a place of unified opposites, emblematic of the Chinese concept of *Yin yang.* It is its authentic inauthenticity, its unsituated situatedness, its "glocal" presence, which provides Hong Kong with its design opportunity.

Benny Leong has already taken up this opportunity in his work as a designer and as a teacher. In common with Fry, Leong responds positively to the lessons that can be drawn from a study of Chinese culture, traditions and history. But these lessons do not simply apply to its representation; they deal with more fundamental and more complex ideas. Leong exhorts a theoretically-based design method as a way of addressing the ethical issues which much modern Western design persists in avoiding.

To establish the depth of approach and understanding in professional design which Fry, Manzini and Leong each advocate will require education. And design education in Hong Kong has yet to find its focus, according to Siu King Chung. Discussing its origins in the 1960s and 70s, Siu reveals how a failure of vision and a lack of clarity in the very understanding of the potential of design was exacerbated by a decision-making process that was largely resource-driven.

It is with Siu then that we end this issue, not just with his paper, but also with the review of the book he compiled with Phoebe Wong, based on the 1999 exhibition *Designs You Don't Know What To Do With.* Lisa Norton's insightful review brings us back to the products of, what Dilnot terms, design with a small "d," design which occurs everywhere. It is a good place to end, in reminding ourselves of the ubiquitousness of design. We have focused here on one place, but the implications and importance of what has been written is by no means culturally specific—it applies both within and beyond Hong Kong—and that is its point.

Before concluding I would like to mention the journal cover, and to thank Eddy Yu, a designer whose work I much admire, for taking the time to provide an excellent and appropriate design. Thanks are also due to each of the contributors, who have suffered variously my coaxing and cajoling, as well as, for some, an extended wait to see their work in print. Also thanks to the editors of *Design Issues* for inviting me to conceive and guest edit this issue and particular thanks to Diane Stadelmeier for her continued support and encouragement. I hope you, the reader, will find the following pages both interesting and stimulating and I would welcome any comments: hazelclark@earthlink.net.

# Which Way Will the Dragon Turn? Three Scenarios for Design in China Over the Next Half-Century

Clive Dilnot

This paper was first given as a talk to the Future of Industrial Design in China conference in Beijing, China in May 1995. Given the long-term prognosis it tried to take on developments in China its formulations may be less archaic than its date implies.

**What is the global context for design today? And how does it bear on design in China?**

The answer is both simple and complex. It is simple in that China currently is being transformed by the global context for design today—that is by the modernizing forces of late capitalism. But as a process it is complex—much more so than the processes of modernization that occurred in the West in the nineteenth century, or even in Russia and Japan earlier this century. It also is different from the "second wave" of demand-led modernization, which transformed the world after 1945, though it shares some of its attributes. This third—and final?—wave of modernization dates from the late 1970s. It has, as its economic engine, three developments of enormous significance which come together in a fourth over-riding condition.

The first is technological, and implicit today in the rise of industries and services based on, or utilizing, the colossal increases in the availability of information processing and communications made possible by computerization. Yet despite its impact, electronic communication is not as significant for production as it is for the ways in which communications technologies facilitate the efficiency of existing global networks of production. Cellular phones, e-mail, and the like—and Hong Kong already is at the global cutting-edge of cell-phone use—make possible extremely efficient transfers of knowledge virtually without time-delay. It is this efficiency and real-time effectiveness of communications that facilitates the enormous global distribution of elements of the total production process. China, most dramatically, is becoming the beneficiary of production which may take place in five or six centers around the globe: with market research in one place, design in a second, production in a third, and distribution and retailing in a fourth.

The second development is particularly important for China. Let's call it the dis-embedding of industrial production from geographically determined centers. The proposition which now rules the location of industry worldwide can easily be stated: *liberated by a combination of increased availability and ease of flow of goods, information and wealth from geography and from a need to locate production*

*within the core areas of consumption, production now locates itself globally almost entirely with respect to cost.* We now are seeing the wholesale movement of production out of the older industrial nations (Britain, Germany, and the United States) into low-cost centers and above all China, with the Pearl River delta as the epicenter. All this is made possible by the efficiency of global shipping and transportation networks, the ease of the flow of commercial information and the fluidity and efficiency of capital markets. For China, for the last fifteen years Hong Kong has provided the gateway through which these three indispensable elements can be accessed. What China gives to global industry in return are not consumers—the current Western fantasy of 1.2 Chinese billion consumers will go unrealized for many years—but low costs, which for global manufacturing simply means cheap labor. But what is astonishing about the period we are entering is not a move of manufacturing to low-cost centers (something we can trace back to the first wave of genuinely international production around 1900-1910), but its scale. *World* production (especially in certain areas of consumer goods) is moving to *specialist* low-cost centers, as evidenced by Hong Kong which, for example, manufactures a significant proportion of plastic toys and watches for the world. Over the next decade, there seems nothing to stop this movement from intensifying. What still is perhaps difficult to comprehend for many in both China and the West is the scale of transformation involved. Statistics don't tell the full story, but in traveling from Hong Kong to Guangzhou, one suddenly sees what is occurring. (Much as the shock for travelers seeing industry in Manchester or Birmingham in say, 1844, brought home, for Engels and others, the radical implications of the first industrial revolution). Thus, it is not as a center of consumption that China will be important during the next twenty-five years but as the new world center of production. Indeed, from the perspective of say, 2020, it may come to seem as if the industrialization that occurred in Hong Kong between 1950 and 1980, in which so many of the principles of highly adaptable, low-cost but highly intelligent production that now characterizes production in the Pearl River delta were worked out, was nothing more than the prelude to the truly epochal creation of coastal China as the twenty-first century's "Workshop of the World." But whatever happens, it already is clear that the developments in China are of a scale that indicates that we are at the beginning of a permanent transformation in the global location of manufacturing. By 2020, in world terms, manufacturing will be essentially an Asian and, moreover, a Chinese enterprise.

A third and important qualifying condition needs to be mentioned—one that is a variant on the issues I have just noted, but which is of special relevance to a conference on design. Already, economists in Hong Kong are speaking of a local transition from "Made in Hong Kong," to "Made by Hong Kong"—meaning that

Hong Kong capital is relocating itself to producing within the Pearl River delta, but the capital and the "front-end" office locations, everything from senior management through marketing and finance—and design—still is located in Hong Kong. Transpose this globally, and what we see already is implicit in the points made, namely that the division of labor, the deepest principle perhaps of modern production, with Adam Smith as its central theorist, now operates in a geographic sense, separating not only worker from designer within the factory, but locating them on different continents. There are two very serious issues here, that of control, and that of value. For industrial designers, what perhaps is more serious is an underlying condition that, in this economy, manufacturing is of no account. This may seem like a bizarre statement. Nonetheless, it essentially is true. The first (British)—and even the second (German-U.S.)—industrial revolutions were based on production. By the end of World War I, the problems of mass-production essentially were solved, as Henry Ford proved so clearly. The massive mobilization and total organization of production that was developed in World War II took production systems to the point where, in 1945, the economic problem of the future was not how to produce, but how to manage demand. The global economy we have been living in essentially is one dominated by the answers given to this problem. From the perspective of the United States and, to a lesser extent, Western Europe, this is well understood. Russia, tragically for the Soviet economy, never understood it; the failure to grasp the simple point that, after 1945, all economies, socialist as well as capitalist, proceed as if the problem of production is overcome, perhaps was the most pressing reason why the Soviet economy ultimately failed. China, for different reasons, above all its structural under-development and the almost complete destruction of production facilities, could not easily learn this lesson. Today, economic forces are compelling adherence to it. In the modern economy, while the problems of production must be solved, the crucial structural problem is demand-management, one of creating demand for the products. Demand and market share must be won via marketing, advertising, and design, and by managing the total product cycle, not just the manufacturing moment. It would be foolish to discount the role that economies of production have in this process, but today that role is essentially negative—it functions largely to reduce costs. Manufacturing cannot, in itself, add value. In that sense, its role diminishes relative to other components of the product-cycle. Today, the cost of producing goods is becoming almost minimal compared to the cost of their development. CDs are a perfect example of how production is the least significant and least profitable aspect of the process. In software, the case is even more apparent. Production is nothing, and development is everything. It's no wonder then that we can speak of a long-term economic trend in which manufactur-

ing becomes a smaller and smaller component of the total world economy, just as the production component of manufacturing is becoming less and less significant as a proportion of the total cost of goods.

What I am saying here might appear to contradict what I said a moment ago about the epochal significance of the huge increases in manufacturing that we can predict will occur in China in the coming decades. But there is no contradiction. The economic fact is that now that the problems of production essentially are solved, there are almost no excess profits to be made from producing per se. This is not to say that individual companies will not find short-term ways of making a good deal of money. They will. The Hong Kong economy is proof of that, as are the new millionaires of the Pearl River delta. But this underlying structure means that production in China will be characterized by ruthless competition over the next few decades. The purchasing companies (i.e., the companies that commission or buy production to ship and market overseas, including the Hong Kong, Taiwanese, Japanese, and Western companies now investing in production facilities in the delta and in coastal China) will work to drive down profit margins to the point where profit in manufacturing alone will be difficult to achieve. If China is not to be reduced simply to being a low-cost factory for the Western economies (and I use this term literally, as well as a play on the original connotation of the term regarding the Pearl River factories of the China trading companies of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) China will have to develop her own capability to manage and create demand. Ultimately, this will be a key role for design in China.

This last point leads directly into the fourth over-riding condition that today determines global production, and therefore what is happening in China. The form of modernization in China now, in 1995, is being experienced with a force similar to what Britain experienced in the early decades of the nineteenth century, it is *total.* It is hard to underestimate the force of this word, or its difference from earlier waves of modernization. To make sense of it, we need an analogy. Historians of the twentieth century, looking at the two world wars, referred to "total war." The term expresses the sense that the wars were waged with unprecedented totality. The wars consumed everything. On the other side, "total war" also meant the idea of total mobilization for war, the complete organization of production and consumption for war ends (something that Britain and then the U.S. became expert at much sooner than Nazi Germany). As in so many other areas, the world wars can be said to have anticipated postwar developments. Today, China is learning rapidly in a context of total modernization. "Total" here means all encompassing. Not only is it a *capitalist* modernization which currently is engulfing and transforming the last, and greatest, non-capitalist enclave left on earth, it also is a totalizing modernity in that

what is sweeping through China today is a process which transforms and *colonizes*—and the term, though offensive, is accurate. Culture, society, and the forces of production, consumption, and reproduction: today these are nothing more, in China as elsewhere, than subjects of the interests of capital. The process is "totalizing" because nothing escapes the net of this modernization process. If China, using its huge population as bait, has opened itself up to the world, the world in turn has entered China determined to remake China in its image. The situation is a familiar one between countries and economies in the core of the world production and those, like China today, still on the periphery (however much China might aspire to, and eventually will develop, core status within the next quarter century or earlier.)

The shape of the struggle that will occur here already is apparent, and design will be in its center. On the one hand is the fact that, essentially and not only incidentally, the modernization process sweeping China is capitalist to its core (i.e., there is nothing outside the market.) On the other there is the idea to preserve something within this process that is distinctly Chinese and even, perhaps, though I am less sanguine about this, something distinctly Marxist. That is, something which belongs, for good or for ill, to the system of state organization that has given China in the last half-century a unique culture, which is not entirely or wholly based on the market and which, for all its limitations and crises, also speaks of cultural and human values and aspirations beyond mere market forces. This struggle is manifestly unequal. To be sure, there will be a cultural veneer applied, at least politically, to what develops. Nationalism alone requires such figleaves. China is no more mature than any other state in being unable to dispense with such figures. Political forces, too, will ensure that the state survives. What is of more interest for designers is the question of the human subject. Capitalism is superb at allying subjective desire with material consumption delivered through the market. The totalizing nature of the wave of capitalist modernization that we are now living through has much to do with the shift of the core capitalist economies to consumption as the engine of "perpetual" economic growth. The realization post-1945 (though anticipated in the U.S. in the 1930s) that managing and sustaining "mass demand" for consumer goods was the only basis on which mature capitalist accumulation could be sustained has morphed today into a frenzied acceleration of credit-based material consumption, based on the decline in the real price of desirable commodities (a fall made possible, in part at least in the last decade, by the opening of China to low-wage, low-cost production).

From a historical perspective, there is a very serious question as to how long this kind of economy can be sustained. Since the late-1960s, the Western economies have been shaken by a series of recessions, from the 1974+ oil-price hike to the downturns of the

early 1980s and early 1990s. It seems today as if we are in the middle of a business-investment led and technologically-inspired boom. But underlying this boom is consumption—fueled by a massive expansion of the availability of individual credit and by the relentless workings of capitalist culture which today permits nothing but consumption to be the *raison d'être* of individual life. However, the longer-term viability of this mode of consumption, premised on the reduction in the real cost of goods for the consumer, is not necessarily guaranteed. While there is no doubt that the greater availability of consumer goods has had a real, and fundamentally positive, effect on lives, especially in easing domestic labor, there is a price to be paid. Mass consumption increasingly means the consumption not just of goods but also of values. What is consumed, or ingested, with the purchase of consumer goods is not just the material ease that things can bring (I recall the ease the clothes washer and cooking range brought for my grandmother.) but also the entire system of values of the market. Increasingly, the goods that are ciphers of this new economy decline in quality as well as in price. The social question to be faced, if China can face the potential of market-driven wealth dealing with social questions, is how can improvements in the material standard of living be organized without recourse to the worst implications of capitalist consumerism? To put it another way, can the giddy euphoria of mass-consumption provide a sustainable basis of an enduring culture?

These questions are crucial because they get to the heart of the tension between the values and needs of the market, and those of the subject. The designer is in a peculiar position in terms of this tension. He or she works, essentially as a servant of both the market and the consumer. Products only succeed if a resonance is established between the features, capabilities, and characteristics of the product and the user. Products that violate this law will fail over time. Part of the designers' role, therefore, is to be a double agent. He or she exists in a constant state of tension—working for the market but, in doing so, also as an advocate for users. A product must find a place within the market economy. This tension runs throughout the market economy, but perhaps is most apparent in design. That is not surprising because, in this mode of capitalism, design is the peculiar nexus between the subject (made over as the consumer) and the products whose consumption sustains the global economy. The "total" modernity that I spoke of earlier has design as one its key moments. Design is the interface—the word is exactly appropriate—between the product and the user, and therefore between capital and the user. And it does not operate in a vacuum. Within the total cycle of production and in relation to the technological systems that underpin the technical, logistical, and financial, not to mention political, components of capitalism, it may still appear a small moment. This is its tradition role, as seen in economic theory,

by technologists and in much business practice. Yet the shibboleth of design's economic marginality, which has devout adherents in Hong Kong I can tell you, is belied by the underlying long-term economic injunction that insists that pure price competition will eventually be self-defeating. There is a significant shift when the economic perspective of production changes from the attempt to win marginal profit from cost-control (as in the Pearl River delta today) to the crucial question of how value is to be added and how the profits available from design improvements can be realized. The centrality of design as the agent of purely technological innovation, which gives form that allows that technology to have a subjectively resonant and useful form, then becomes apparent.

**Where does this overview leave us, for design, in China today?**
I've tried to place what I understand is happening in China, particularly in the Pearl River delta, in the context of the trajectory of global capitalism. China now is an actor on the world stage. That stage is different today. It is in the process of realignment, especially economically, because of China's changing place in it. But the determinants of how actors come onto that stage are capitalist; all others are reduced to peripheral status, if they exist at all. In saying they are capitalist means they also are Western. Crudely speaking, China currently is an "outsource" for the West. This realization, as I've already suggested, cuts two ways, and has two implications for design.

In the first instance, it would suggest, that the prognosis for design in China, particularly industrial design, is not good, or at least not in the short term. In industrialization dominated by export-oriented production, essentially determined from the outside, there is very little space for the original and innovative reconfiguration or redefinition of products. Product definitions (for example the concept of what a product is, the understanding of the category that it belongs to, and the pattern of how it is configured) are, at the moment, given to and not determined by, China. Nothing exemplifies this more than the fact that a number of the major Hong Kong fashion retail companies do not have their design base in the territory, but in New York. Design is linked to markets and to product conception driven through on-site market analysis. This has strong implications for design. The fact that production in China still is essentially determined from without is to have to come to terms with the fact that, at the moment, mature product innovation and development cannot exist, or at least not on any scale. Product design in the Pearl River delta, for example, is largely a matter of low-value adaptation of existing product types for market-niche opportunities. In this context, product design follows, it does not invent. The design model is not innovation but the copy, a strategy pioneered long ago by Hong Kong's nascent manufacturers and, before them, by the eighteenth century traders of the Pearl River.

There follows the cynical tenet, that in Hong Kong, "R&D" means not research and development but "replication and duplication." The negative implications for design epitomized by this model are obvious—the copy economy always will tend to trivialize, cheapen and operationalize the role of the designer.

But is this situation all bad? Certainly it indicates the objective, structural, difficulty of establishing a mature design profession in China today, if by mature profession we think of something on the model of American or western European practice. But is this really what is required? Is there perhaps within the emerging situation, especially in the longer term, the seedbed of a different model of design altogether?

The Western model of the industrial design profession arose from specific historical circumstances, for example, it arose in relation to, and as a part of, an economy based on demand management, with industrial design charged with the responsibility of ensuring product desirability and with building into products a modicum (but only a modicum) of social responsibility. If something of this model still remains in some European, Japanese, and American instances, the change in economic conditions manifested over the last decade or so has made it an increasingly historical, and even a discredited, model. Its key problem is its assumption of autonomy. "Classic" industrial design, that is to say in the forms the profession took after 1945, was ambiguous about its role in business. On the one hand, product design cannot be separated from industry. On the other, the designer as an individual and the design profession itself saw themselves, to some extent rightly so, as advocates within the product development process of noncommercial values. This could take the form of a defense of principle (the ideology of functionalism, or of "pure design values"), of aesthetics, or of the user. The problem here was not the defense or the advocacy (within the development process it is hard to see who else might stand up for the user or for aesthetics), but that the relative autonomy that the profession worked within meant that designers neither became fully involved in the business of product development (economics, strategic management and product planning rarely being part of their training) nor became fully autonomous. When compared with architecture, for example, and except at certain moments (most obviously, Italy from the 1960s through 1980s), industrial design has shown an absence of critical judgment and exploration. Rejecting theory and criticism, eschewing the challenge to articulate the depth of what it advocated and dealt with, and fired up by an equal refusal to come to terms with the profession's roles in the contemporary capitalist commodity economy, industrial design took refuge in a weak objectivism that simply meant a closing of the mind to the critical issues involved both in design's economic functioning and its complex role with things and persons.

It is this position of "relative autonomy" of the design

profession vis-à-vis either business or subjects that is breaking down today. In practice, product design in the developed and developing economies now tends to take one of two distinct forms. On the one hand is what we can call the Hong Kong model. Here, design is given low priority and status. The possibility of the designers' contribution to the early stages of the product development process is scarcely understood. Effort goes instead on short-term market response and on the pragmatic organization of production processes for manufacture at the lowest possible cost. In this process, at best design is either a form of packaging, a cheap means of adding identity or additional-value (the "add-a-feature" strategy of Hong Kong manufacturers) to a product, or it is an unimportant stage in the process of making a tooling die. At worst, for instance in the Hong Kong jewelry industry, there is simply no sense of what design can offer. This is the low-end model of design-in-business, one which is not a model sustainable in a mature economy. It is the model dominant in China today, i.e., design as a peripheral moment in the production of goods whose essential configuration is determined elsewhere.

The other is what I'll call the design-managed model. By that I mean the situation, evident in a number of core-nation leading companies, where the product development process is rethought and replanned, so that the process of designing and the product itself (and the axioms which rule its determination) are, at best, comprehensively redefined, reconfigured, and often wholly rethought. The products made under this system are, needless to say, not competing only on grounds of price, but rather in terms of product quality and innovation. Through focusing on non-price issues, particularly human factors, and on cultural and psychological factors just as much as ergonomic ones, these companies seek to offer new levels of resonance between product and user. BMW is a beautiful example in car design. It is a process that creates world-class products—one scarcely found in China today. It is almost completely absent also in Hong Kong. But Japan, and to some degree South Korea, have sophisticated corporate versions of this process (one thinks of Samsung for example).

I stress these two models because they offer radically different possibilities as to what design is allowed to contribute, and because it seems, at least at first sight, that industrial designers in China are still denying the existence of both of these models. Judging from what is exhibited in the hall next door for example, we see what is almost a nostalgia for a European design world which already is passing away (to be replaced not only by the processes I spoke of above, but by a whole host of other types of design relationships and design developments ranging from small-batch, designer-maker shops to software design). It strikes me, as I think it would strike most outside observers, that the attempt to create a design profession on the basis of a now historic, largely

mythical and essentially problematic model of industrial design is doomed to failure. By the time such a profession establishes itself outside of, as well as inside of, the universities it would be anachronistic in global terms. Indeed far from looking forward such a model looks backward. It certainly cannot come to grips with either the new commercial or the existing and emerging social demands. Such a comment sounds hard. It is made because it is clear that this is not the only possibility for a design profession in China (although it must be said that the possible alternatives are less visible and less immediately identifiable).

Let's look in more detail at these demands, and how understanding them might help in forging a sense of a globally viable strategy for design in China. To end on a somewhat happier note I will focus on what I'll call three possible "optimistic" scenarios for design in China in the coming decades.

**What Design in China Might Be:**
**Three Scenarios for Design in China in the Next Fifty Years.**

*Scenario 1: Design becomes strategic, a key ingredient in China's transformation from being a low-cost manufacturing unit to being the global center of new product innovation.*

In speaking of design in relation to current tendencies within the global economy, I have said that one tendency—epitomized in what I've called "the Hong Kong model"—is to trivialize and operationalize the role of the designer. It follows that one way of refiguring the possibilities for design is to redefine the designer's role so that it shifts from an essentially operational and essentially secondary role (where the designer always is a servant of the client) to a tactical or strategic role in which the designer is recognized as a key player in the process of conceiving, realizing, and innovating new products. At best, the designer is someone who articulates new visions of life through developing, innovating and modeling new products—products which indicate or enable new ways of living. I'll speak in a minute about the social and ecological implications of this, but I remain first with the economic. I've indicated above that, even if we assume another ten to fifteen years of this almost unparalleled transfer of global manufacturing capability to China, it may not be sufficient to ensure the country's future as an industrial power. The economic subtext of my first scenario is the urgent need for China to stabilize, that is to make permanent its industrial renaissance. In a world in which production flows to the site of the most poorly paid labor force (which is what industrial capital-flow investment is all about) there is a constant danger of industrial production "disappearing" from China as fast as it recently has arrived. If you need convincing, go to Shenzhen where there already can be seen sites of abandoned industrial enterprises: from

industrialization to de-industrialization in little more than a decade! In any case, if China is not going to keep its working population on the minimum possible wage, with all the political tensions that are at risk, especially as the social fabric of society is ripped away in the process of "modernization," the quality of industrial production, in terms of value added, must be increased quite significantly. In other words, China must, in U.S. terms, "get its act together" and begin to produce world-class products. This alone suggests the necessity for strategic design. One thing is clear—in a world with a surfeit of products and product designs, imitations of what-exists will not provide the basis for an indigenous high-value export industry. What worked for Japan in the context of the 1950s will not necessarily work for China in the changed context of the next century.

But on what basis might such products be made? Three answers immediately suggest themselves. The first was given in the *China Daily* yesterday. That is, the solution of science-technology and the development of new products as an outgrowth of scientific research—products which would of course require design as the agent for the translation of the technological possibility into humanly usable and desirable products. The second, is the solution of origination: the production of objects rethought as to their identities and axiomatic structure. The third solution, which is a variant of the second, is origination in product concepts and operation gained by drawing on one's own resources, i.e., developing new product languages out of the resources offered within the traditions of Chinese products and Chinese understandings of the psychology of the relations between persons and things. None of these strategies are mutually exclusive. All may be combined in various forms. Each is a solution of research and analysis as much as of form-making. Put another way, what they have in common is that they presuppose a confident and radical reassessment of "what is." Most crucially of all, each draws on a palpable resource internally and integrally available in China, and each, for better or for worse, accepts the risk of redefining existing product identities.

Perhaps it is difficult from a Chinese perspective to realize just what little risk the latter involves. Product identities as formulated in the advanced economies are, quite frankly, increasingly exhausted. The magazines hide a brutal truth under their cosmetic photography. Western industrial design, itself massively limited by its own limitations as well as by its dependence on corporate structures often sclerotic in attitude to product development, has for thirty years recycled essentially the same solutions to product problems. The banality of what is offered to the global consumer ought to be an embarrassment to every designer and capitalist. But the situation, ghastly as it often is (are contemporary products really the best we can do after more than two centuries of industrialization?) contains a real, economic, possibility. Globally, "design rents" potentially are now to be had by reworking product identity such that

one essentially reinvents the product. What you have in China today are an extraordinary series of resources—scientific, intellectual, cultural, and psychological—which could be used to fuel such an attempt. (These resources of course would include the increasing confidence of the Chinese people themselves). Such work is not easy: but it may permit what, at the moment, cannot occur, namely the invention and development of an authentically modern Chinese culture (something of which if it is left to capitalist market forces will be trivialized out of existence).

What are the possibilities of such a scenario being realized, and what would it look like? In the short term, and by that I mean the next decade, it is difficult to see sufficient space for this scenario to develop, except perhaps in small ways within universities as a research strategy. If the present rate of inflow of manufacturing investment continues, it is likely that all it will be is the focus of all business (and government) attention. Simply managing this transition—and managing it to produce profit—is an enormous task. Changing tack is made because the companies that either directly invest in new manufacturing capability or which underwrite local investment are not interested in seeing local product innovation. The economic, for this read "marketing," centers of the world remain the U.S., Western Europe, and Japan. Closeness to these markets will keep product conceptualization firmly in the core countries. But two developments could change this situation. The first is the increasing pressure on profits, which is likely to be inexorable. As capacity increases, so does the ability of the buyer to negotiate ever lower prices. As this pressure mounts, the psychological and economic disincentive to risk product origination may fall away. Let us speculate that this may begin to happen between 2005–2015, perhaps sooner if there is an economic slump. The second and perhaps slightly longer-term possibility is that cultural changes in the West, and increasing sophistication among business in China, especially in marketing and user research will, enable the beginning of a cultural reconceptualization of a number of major product types. I was amazed after arriving in Hong Kong to find almost half a dozen branches of the Swedish home furnishing firm IKEA. If IKEA can sell remarkably successfully in Hong Kong, what are the chances, twenty to thirty years from now, of a Chinese company selling modern furnishings in Stockholm? Impossible? Why?—given the astonishing history of Chinese furniture (remarkably suited to modern adaptation) and given what we might predict as the exhaustion of the Western model.

*Scenario 2: Design in China takes on a crucial role in helping to alleviate and then restructure the ecological crises that will strike within the next twenty-five to fifty years. Design, as the design of "sustainable cultural future's" becomes a key element in restructuring Chinese society after the production-led excesses of the period 1980–2020.*

This scenario is so long term that it may seem to most of you in this hall as wholly irrelevant to the issues of today. It is not. And in their heart of hearts, I doubt if anyone here really thinks it is. There is no doubt that China will be the first major nation to have to deal with system-threatening ecological collapse. If economic development continues to be managed as irresponsibly as at the moment, then the resource implications and the problems of dealing with second, third, and fourth-order consequences of development will set in train both ecological disasters on a scale not yet imagined in the world, and consequent social, economic, and then political crises. Ecological design is, in this case, an essential, not an optional scenario for China in the next thirty years. The logic of this scenario is based on the manner in which global tendencies towards unsustainable crises (particularly global warming with all its consequences for the changes in weather patterns, but also the impending crisis of usable water supplies—and Beijing is hugely vulnerable here) will be intensified by the pace, scale, and irresponsibility of development. The abandonment of planning, plus a culture of short-termism with respect to the managing of both natural and artificial resources, almost certainly will combine with worsening global conditions to precipitate both small-and large-scale disasters. (Projects predicated on an almost nostalgic respect for technological—projects on the scale of the Stalinist fantasies of the 1950s and '60s can now, unfortunately, be realized as earlier ones could not: I refer here, above all, to the Three Gorges project.) Where "sustainable design" comes in as a strategy is as the process that begins to anticipate these issues and to plan for them. This is not "product design" in any of the usual senses of the term. We are speaking of something much more extensive; of a mixture of design, economics, and social science (interacting with environmental management) to produce the conditions for sustainable economic development in a context of ecological and perhaps consequent political, social, and economic crises. While this is not product design in the usual sense, it is not *not* product design in that the ability to give form to products—in this case sustainable form—becomes key. What that leaves is to be investigated. But it is hard to think of a more important long-term project for China than to begin research in these fields, research which uses design, with its ability to give evident form to things that did not possess form, as a central moment of its work. So, in this scenario, design becomes a central research activity, exploring and anticipating future possibilities (and in the process drawing on the millennia of careful Chinese thought about the character of man-nature relations).

How likely is this scenario to occur? Not at all likely, I am tempted to say, until it is too late. Yet it is almost impossible to imagine that China will not encounter very severe "ecological" crises in the coming decades, and I mean ecological here not just in terms of nature, but regarding the fit of development and environment in the widest sense. The economic implications of these problems could be vast, as could the social and political ramifications. So let us predict that major problems will manifest themselves globally, as well as in China, by, say 2015, and perhaps much earlier. These will begin to require a new kind of scientific, technological, and planning effort in which design is centrally involved. It follows that a student who graduates today as an industrial designer will be facing these problems at, say, age forty-five...the peak of his or her career. How well trained will he or she be to face these problems? The answer, here just as in the West, is not at all. One of the terrible consequences of late capitalism is that it persuades us—to a degree impels us—to live in a perpetual present, excising both historical and futurological understanding. The present today means "the economic modernization of China"—a good and laudable goal given the material impoverishment of the vast majority of China's citizens for most of this century. The question for design—its professional question, or better its ethical question—is how should design anticipate its future role and how therefore should it deal with its own implication and involvement in the processes that will lead to these crises? This is a very serious question. The long-term credibility of the design profession in China will depend on how it is answered.

*Scenario 3: Design becomes everywhere: design as "silent design" and design as institutional design. China becomes a truly advanced sustainable industrial nation at the core of a new world economy: 2025–2050.*

For anything like "sustainable" design to be put in place, a final scenario is necessary. Though logically it comes before the ecological, historically it may well come after, though the former also will be built on the embryo of this mode of "designing." This strategy is that of "silent design," to use a term from design management. "Silent design" refers to the manner in which design activities occur within a company or institution not only in the design office, but in many other locations. Silent design draws attention to design as shaping activity—an activity which may be located in products, but which also may equally, and today with as much validity, be applied to institutions and to their behavior. How is this a design strategy? It is so in the sense that we are talking of designing as the process of shaping—things certainly, but also institutions, programs, systems.... This process is design with a small "d," design as a verb, an activity. It occurs everywhere. What distinguishes Design, with a capital "D", is a much more self-conscious process. Indeed, at best, that is what Design is, it's the process of becoming self-conscious about making, shaping and forming. All things, be

they products, institutions, or systems, are configured, that is they are formed. Design in this sense, our sense, is the process whereby the form of things is put on the table as it were, where configuration is examined, self-critically and often reinvented. This is design's great virtue. This is what it offers business and what it promises society. It is also, by itself, very often the source of design's irresponsibility. What is going to be interesting in China, and in the West also of course, is how, in the long run, this sense of design will merge with, and will be tempered by, the idea of systemic, institutional, and behavioral design.

What then is interesting, in the shorter term, is how this "expanded" understanding of design moves back into industrial design in the more limited sense. Here we come back to the situation in the Pearl River delta, and the idea of developing a transformation of the kind of product manufactured in southern China. Already, in a sense, variants of this scenario are at work in the processes of designing production systems in the delta. The Hong Kong economy was long characterized by astonishingly inventive configurations and adaptations of production technologies and methods. The process today is intensified. But that very process points to this wider sense of designing where one is no longer designing one component of the production-consumption cycle, but its entirety. This is strategic design at an even higher level than that referred to above. Here we are looking at totalities, at seeing the entire production (and consumption) process as a "design" moment where clearly it is not the explicit formal aesthetics of this process that are at issue, but a more subtle process of shaping a totality to a context, or of shaping a product to the complexities of its use and production in the very widest sense of those terms. Oddly, these areas traditionally have not been where the designer lived, and this is not surprising if he or she emerged essentially from a quasi-craft tradition and education.

To say this is not at all to denigrate that education—its significance continues. But what is essential to grasp is the longer-term emergence of system or institutional design where the entirety of the process is up for grabs. It is safe to say that, in the conscious sense, almost none of this is occurring today in China as "design." But of course, in other forms, in other guises, it is happening all the time. What is politics but a "design" in this wider sense?

The third design possibility for China is that this will become better understood; that in seeing design as essentially a strategic activity, we see it also as a planning activity: design as a way of building and exploring scenarios for the future—within the firm, within the commune or the township, and within the province. We are talking about the shaping of institutions in the way that we shape products. Products work best we said, when their features, capabilities, and capacities in some way resonate with the features, capabilities, and capacities of persons. The same applies to institu-

tions and systems. As China builds itself into a global core nation, this element of system will become of more account. The extraordinary opportunity for design in China in this last scenario will be to design China! The statement is not quite as absurd as it sounds.

**Concluding Remarks**

I cannot develop the full scope of this last scenario design here, nor in the time I have left can I tie it in any better to the question of ecological design and the possibilities I advanced for developing strategic product design. But there is a common thread. The three scenarios I have offered are *active.* They involve the designer in moving, rather than passively waiting for the industrial client. They redefine him, or her, as a socially involved thinker-doer concerned not with the manufacture of another trivial bauble, but with setting in motion designing as a process through which a way of life can be given shape and enabled to come into being (because the physical, social, and psychological conditions of that life are realized directly and indirectly through the forms of the things we live with, engage with, and use to enable our lives to be). The one moment of modernist design that is worth preserving is the ambition to fold a moment of the utopian into the everyday. That was one of socialism's ambitions, which it might be well to remember in the rush to embrace the market. For if it is not remembered in human terms, we shall find it remembered only in terms of the market and its values. Even if the market is necessary, it still is not everything.

We make our lives through how we make. Design is about this equation.

# Homes for China

Laurent Gutierrez and Valerie Portefaix

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

## Part I

Nineteenth and twentieth century models elsewhere in the world offers a valid critical frame through which to observe Hong Kong's new living standards. The idea of building housing prototypes in which large groups of people have an improved daily life through density has taken different forms in social reformers', industrialists', and architects' dreams.

### The Experience of Living

*Living in Utopia*

Throughout the nineteenth century, rapid industrialization in many ways participated in establishing a new form of society, changing modes of production, the structure of territories, and standards of housing developments. With the ambition to take care of its own, industry promoted a series of new urban prototypes ranging from the industrial city to factory towns and projected utopian communities. Liberating potential for a radical vision, these transformations generated the possibility of inventing a new and "better," industrial world. Utopian socialists such as Frenchmen Charles Fourier (1772–1837) and Henri Saint-Simon promoted an urban and social alterna-

tive through the development of a nonrepressive society in which conflicts would be resolved by the construction of a rational social order. Introduced in the Enlightenment, their intention combined a progressive idea of history and a commitment to universal liberation from an obsolete authority. In opposition to a liberal capitalistic system, Fourier's philosophy presented a system in which the underprivileged could experience a collective form of happiness. In his essay, *Le Nouveau Monde industriel et sociétaire* (trans: *New Industrial and Shareholder World*) published in 1829, he justified the establishment of ideal communities or *phalanstères* (1822), as structures of a new order.

Projected in a rural area, the phalanstery is described[1] as a miniature town, with interior streets sheltered from adverse weather conditions. In order to be self-sufficient, its economy was to be predominantly agricultural together with some light manufacturing. Fourier saw it as an association of 1,500 to 1,600 people of various ages, wealth, and occupations grouped on twelve million square meters of land:

> The country should comprise a nice water stream, be landscaped with hills and be suitable for varied cultivation, be built against a forest and little distant from the city, just enough to elude importune.[2]

A balanced range of people plus an ideal location were regarded as the ideal ingredients to conceive a *"Palace of Harmony."* An essential element of the system, the phalanx, was a three-story residential linear block with interior street galleries and swimming pools on the roof. Scaled into twenty different prices, the apartments and cells were completed with a series of communal facilities, services, and activities taking place on the ground level, at corridor intersections, and on each floor. These included kitchens, dining rooms of various sizes, ballrooms, theatres, nurseries, and schools, within a structure collectively heated and protected from the rain or other inconveniences.

In 1825, another social reformer Robert Owen (1771–1858) produced plans for a series of ideal communities that he named *"Harmony,"* which he failed in an attempt to export to the New World of the United States of America. Thirty years later, a follower of Fourier's theories, French industrialist J.P. Godin (1817–1888) finally made the phalanstery concept a reality with *Familistère*, a complex attached to his factory at Guise (France). Built in 1859 to accommodate the laboring masses, three residential blocks, a crèche, a kindergarten, a theatre, schools, public baths, and a laundry formed a cooperative family living environment in which the more radical aspects of Fourierism proved their feasibility.

1 Charles Fourier, "Traité de l'Association domestique agricole" (1822) in Marcel Roncaloyo and Thierry Paquot, eds., *Villes & Civilisation Uurbaine* (Paris: Larousse, 1992), 66–88.

2 Ibid. 67. Translated by authors.

**The Commune House**

During the 1920s and 1930s, the idea of legitimating residential models for an egalitarian society progressed in a more specific form in Russia. As a part of these social changes, the political equality of women invited reformers to amend their domestic agendas, and allow their participation as part of the labor force. As Hilary French writes,

> The seeds of the idea of the commune-house may have started when workers were resettled in the nationalized large houses and villas of the overthrown bourgeoisie, where several families would share one big kitchen and use the spacious entrance hall as the communal living room.[3]

In 1928, the first initiative came from the Union of Contemporary Architects—OSA—which built the Narkomfin Apartment Building, an experimental commune house in Moscow. The idea was to create a hybrid, producing something between a traditional apartment building containing entirely private flats and a new type of communal housing in which a larger social group would share some areas. Used as a laboratory for housing production, the Narkomfin Building incorporated various family units, ranging from the minimum "F-type" unit to the larger "K-type," a two-story apartment duplex, with two bedrooms—one above the other—adjoining a double-height living space. These types could be used as one, two, or three room units, and the entire complex was made up of the multiplication and encasing of different units. This building contained a full range of social functions such as a kindergarten on the ground floor, kitchen, canteen, dining, and reading rooms, and a gymnasium on the roof level. All communal areas were permanently air-conditioned to encourage collective gathering rather than individual activities.

In England, the idea of building commune houses originated from a radically different type of social engagement. Here, the target was the cosmopolitan British intellectual, and the motivation was to import the hotel life-style into a permanent form of residence. In 1934, architect Wells Coates realized a commune house on Lawn Road, London, a four-story block with twenty-two one-room flats, external gallery access, staff accommodation for a manager, garage space for eight cars, and centralized services such as laundry and kitchen. All flats were supplied with central heating and hot water. Additional services such as bed-making, shoe-polishing, collection of rubbish, and the distribution of laundry completed the package, which included meals that could be ordered and delivered to the flat. Packed like the cabins of an ocean liner, each included built-in furniture and fittings, the ideal configuration for a bachelor with few possessions and no family. A new alternative to large traditional houses, the Lawn Road residential model had all the advantages, and became a standard similar to the Russian commune houses.

3 Hilary French, "Living Together" in *Impossible Worlds: The Architecture of Perfection* Setphen Coates and Alex Stetter, eds., (Basel: Birkhauser, 2000), 33.

***Unité d' Habitation***

The original housing types designed by OS, shared an apparent continuity in the *Unité de grandeur conforme* (trans: Unity of the Proper Size) prototype developed in 1945 by Le Corbusier. Starting from a standard section, the *Unité* has the addition of two individual apartments ingeniously stacked so that the double-height living room of one unit stood below or above the single-height bedrooms of another. Derived from the "F-type," the two, interlocked apartment units formed a drawn-out section with an interior street in the middle of the structure. As William Curtis observed, some principles of the *Unité* found an echo in the utopian-socialist prototype:

> It was no coincidence that 1,600 was the number posited by Le Corbusier as the ideal population for the mini-society of the *Unité,* since the same figure had been suggested by Charles Fourier for his phalanstère over a century before.[4]

Curtis extended the comparison to include the interior street system and the image of the building as a collective, insulated city. Promoting the concept of a collective *machine à habiter* (trans: machine to live in) as a social condenser, Le Corbusier defended this high density as a solution which freed the ground for traffic and nature, to develop a variety of apartment sizes and to provide communal facilities such as a landscaped roof terrace.

The next point to consider is the correlation between a *Unité* and its region. Le Corbusier's original drawings presented a vast plan to redevelop southern Marseilles as a vast park planted with a series of *Unité,* but he only received approval for one single prototype. Built in 1947, the *Unité d'Habitation* at Marseilles explored some of the main themes promoted by the French Ministry of Reconstruction in the post-war years. Conditions of its construction were dependent upon factory produced units, and each apartment was slotted into the overall structural frame of the building—like wine bottles in a rack. With seventeen stories raised on colossal *pilotis,* it contained twenty-three different apartment types ranging from those for single individuals to a type for a family with four children. Half of the seventh and eighth floors contained a small restaurant, an eighteen- room hotel to accommodate the tenants' guests, a small shopping center, and a few offices (mainly architectural firms). On the seventeenth floor roof terrace, a nursery and kindergarten were set up as a natural open space for kids to play on. With a 300-meter running track, pool, gymnasium, performance stage, and solarium, the roof could be seen as an echo of the surrounding Provencal Mountains, and the Mediterranean sea and sun. Seen from a distance, it now stands as the singular manifestation of some heroic age, living its own life. Visiting the *Unité,* one can still observe the idealism of its origin:

> It is interesting to visit the *Unité* between five and six in the evening in the autumn, when it is still hot enough to wear

4 William Curtis, *Modern Architecture Since 1900* (London: Phaidon, 1982), 441.

shorts and thin cotton dresses. People flood in from work and school, leaving their cars under the trees; they dawdle by the banks of cypresses, or play tennis, or shop in the upper street. On the roof terrace, old men chat, catching the last of the afternoon sun while their grandchildren splash in the pool.[5]

## Part II

Density, connectivity, intensity, speculation, and new living conditions are largely the results of the last fifty years of Hong Kong's public housing policy. With barely 3.5 million people, about half of the population, living in public residential blocks or estates, the government has resolutely directed the vertical rise of housing developments. The more modest of recent developments now typically include eight towers clustered together, each with between forty and fifty-two floors. With eight flats to a floor, and four people to a flat, one of these developments can house up to 12,000 people. And with a typical site area of between two and three hectares, that means a density of up to 6,000 people per hectare. This can be compared with the 250 people per hectare in Haussmann's Paris, and 500 in Singapore, and is twice as dense the most densely populated part of Hong Kong, Mong Kok. (Figure 1)

**Life at Hyper-Density**

*Living in Harmony*

The extensive public housing program originated a few years after the end of WWII, when the growing squatter problem found a tragic end in the disastrous fire of Christmas Eve 1953 that wiped out 50,000 homes in the Shek Kip Mei squatter camp overnight. Starting with "temporary safe housing of a minimum standard," [6] initial efforts were to provide collective, basic services around a

5 William Curtis, *Le Corbusier Ideas and Forms* (London: Phaidon, 1986), 174.

6 Public Housing Development, Rising High in Harmony, Hong Kong, HKHA, 1993, 16.

Figure 1
Bloc 2: Private high rise housing development in Cahi Wan, Hong Kong island. "Lack of land and a growing population have provided the perfect context with which to experiment with the forms of density. Today the highest residential development counts 72-stories."

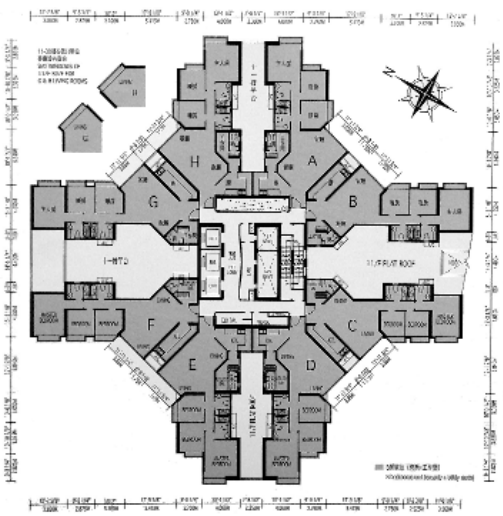

Figure 2
Homes plan—Harmony 8/8 Flats "With 8 flats to a floor and 4 people to a flat, these developments are home to 12,000 people.
© Gutierrez + Portefaix

Figure 3
Homes scenario—Celebration 1. "To alleviate the stress of a dense urban living environment, each enclave is equipped with a full range of services. These facilities replicate the style and organization of a palatial hotel to offer what promoters call 'VIP therapy.'"
© Grand Del Sol, Sun Hung Kai Properties Lt.

modest private living space. Yet even in the first permanent blocks, tenants still had to share water and only had access to toilets or cooking facilities on the communal balconies. Shops on the ground floor and a kindergarten on the roof usually completed the elementary planning. From these original "Mark 1" factory-shed schemes to the latest cruciform towers known in Hong Kong as "Harmony" blocks, the thorough and well worked out organization of collective amenities always has served to counterbalance the obvious lack of individual space and privacy. To implement such large-scale plans, the public sector immediately developed prefabricated, factory-made components for cost-effective construction. This created a series of standardized models that rapidly spread throughout the territory. (Figure 2)

Recently, the private sector has adopted similar typologies, but with a range of programs that go far beyond the original basic prototype. Derived from a highly competitive context, their planning directly reflects the fickle demands of the real estate market. Cleverly packaged with a marketing concept, Hong Kong's private housing producers have demonstrated their singularity and superiority by inventing a new utopia for living. (Figure 3)

Figure 4
Homes scenario—Celebration 2.
© Royal Peninsula, Sun Hung Kai Properties Ltd.

Figure 5
Bloc 1 Private high rise housing development in Chai Wan, Hong Kong island.
© 2003 Gutierrez + Portefaix.

**Living in a Villa**

In the arena of private housing speculation, architecture is no longer the art of designing buildings, but rather a means of expressing an exclusive concept or a collective fantasy. Advertising brochures and showrooms certainly gather more attention than the products they sell. Aggressive promotional campaigns start simultaneously with the development's foundations, meaning flats are sold long before their physical completion. Architects often are engaged to design a "show-flat," although they are not involved in the main building. Perfected with "classic" or "modern" furniture, the latest TV plasma screen, reproductions of masterpieces, and a large number of mirrors, the show flats absorb and reflect a collective dream. In the same way its fake windows support the image of a colorful landscape, an improbable view considering the density in and around the residential complex. But this is hardly the point. Like the original, it presents a specialized residential niche and tightly packages the local environment and lifestyle. (Figure 4)

Each residential development forms a group of towers mounted on a podium in which a highly diverse range of communal activities takes place, from shopping to restaurants and sports clubs. These complexes are developed along a unique structure which is repetitive, complete, closed, hermetic, autonomous, and perfectly coded. Each development presents a range of choices that varies from one to three bedrooms, with the top floors reserved for duplexunits. Each residential dwelling unit, or cell, on offer is more or less the same, but pretends to be different. These sixty story giants with 12,000 residents are presented in marketing campaigns as if they were colossal "homes" which somehow have managed to preserve the refined atmosphere of a private villa, therefore stretching the private format of the apartment to absorb the public. (Figure 5)

**Living in a Theme**

To a certain degree, the podium has become the major selling point. Unfolded as an experimental field, it is the place where the theme applied to the whole development is disclosed. As in theme parks, the basic structure is camouflaged behind a thick crust of screens, walls, lights, mirrors, water, and sounds—decorative elements that refer to both fashionable style and to images of luxury. Strategically, the theme is an opportunity for the global economy and the local market to confront each other, forming Hong Kong's most successful recipe: "global style—local trade." [7] Developers lure buyers with images of a Hawaiian resort, utopian garden, medieval castle, antique Greece, Spanish atmosphere, renaissance and baroque sculptures.[8] The marketing vocabulary flatters the potential client further. In its brochure, the Castello promotes "a Royal sentiment, an Imperial attention, an Aristocratic enjoyment, the Envy of Royalty, a Noble style, a Royal residence providing luxurious living fit for a King." [9] This is to remind and reinforce the potential resident's class and status, with all the prevalent clichés.

To some extent, this superficial interpretation of a theme and the reservoir where styles are endlessly combined together has formed a new aesthetic in response to a new delocalized condition. The theme becomes a true world, meaning the one in which you have chosen to live. Today, when Venice and Paris are in Las Vegas, it is no surprise to find Hawaii and Athens in Hong Kong. The former are casinos, yet much more: the latter are super-dormitories—but not only that. Both support the architecture of events, and their special effects are more important than their functional imperatives. They offer an appropriation without risk in which the décor matches what is found in publicity campaigns, brochures and showrooms. In that sense, the dislocation of time and space is not perceived as false, but as the clone of a perfect world. Seeking immediate recognition, their design consists of (re)produced atmospheres to be instantly appropriated by the public:

> Bringing a Caribbean holiday home is not too much to ask for. At Caribbean Coast, you can have this dream come true. Caribbean Coast houses the most comprehensive and best equipped residential clubhouse in Hong Kong. Renowned Architect and Landscape Architect—Hsin Yieh and Belt Collins—have turned Caribbean Coast into a magnificent Central American resort with an extensive selection of water sports facilities. Vivid colours and decorative details are everywhere to enhance the mood of the West Atlantic and the British West Indies.[10]

7 © Castello. Sun Hung Kai Properties.

8 They appropriate stereotypes of travel posters, art movements and time periods.

9 "The dominant forces of globalization are weakened by powerful Chinese commercial operations that control the world's biggest factory. Like anywhere else, Hong Kong gently absorbs Italian, Parisian, and Japanese fashions. However, ten times that volume is simultaneously produced and sold on the streets as cheap copies." Gutierrez and Portefaix, "Global Style, Local Trade" in *Mapping HK* (Hong Kong: map book, 2000), 5–21.

10 © Caribbean Coast, Cheung Kong (Holdings) Limited.

**Island Culture**

*Bridges*

Private residential developments usually are built on prized sites. Special value is allotted to isolated yet well connected locations. In the advertising brochure, the ideal situation is reinforced by the propagandist image of a solitary block raised in the middle of a rural jungle. Regardless of location, each development competes for both the best natural scenery and the fastest connection:

> Situated on the coast of Castle Peak Road, the views from the property can be described as heavenly, and not to be found anywhere else. Mountains and oceans gently wrap themselves around the entire property. Gaze towards the north and see the beautiful Tam Lam Chung Reservoir and Tai Lam Country Park. And if you enjoy plane or car spotting, the airport and the North Lantau Express way is right in front of your eyes.[11]

Bridges or pedestrian elevated networks, allow almost all of these enclosed developments to be directly plugged into major transportation hubs and commercial centers. With sophisticated calculation, developers strive to demonstrate the proximity to the centralized infrastructure and prestigious educational institutions. Ultimately, the apartment price will largely depend on these physical links. Public transportation or private shuttle facilities will invariably take less than half an hour—23 minutes seems the magic length of time to reach any important center in the territory. *Villa Esplanada* advertised itself as being:

> Close to the Tsing Yi Airport Railway station—At Lai King Airport Railway Station you can change to the MTR—Connects with Lantau Island—Takes you straight into Kowloon—Connects with Hong Kong Island ... .[12]

## Dislocation

Becoming part of the "new transportation hub," these new centers and/or gateways propose new territorial strategies fully supported by the government. The multiplication of centers along natural (mountain or seashore) or artificial (transportation infrastructure) lines constitutes an effective strategy with which to colonize remaining parts of the natural countryside. On TV, a commercial shows a running train that has the capacity to change rice fields into a collection of concrete jungles. The mass railway transportation system and terminals are the essential elements in reproducing this model to the furthest limits of the territory. This expressive vision confirms the actual strength of a few private corporations. As railway lines move forward, new centers emerge:

> Tsing Yi is the prime spot for new developments. With the town's infrastructure, key NAPCO project and community

11 © Grand Pacific Views. Sun Hung Kai Properties.

12 © Villa Esplanada, Sun Hung Kai Properties.


Figure 6
Tsing Yi station transportation map. "23 minutes is the magic interval between home and work, airport."
© Villa Esplanada, Sun Hung Kai Properties, Ltd.

facilities in their final stages, a new metropolis is about to be born. Because of Tsing Yi's unique location, it has been cited by the Government as the centre of Metroplan, one of the largest projects to be staged in the history of Hong Kong. Metroplan, a multi-billion dollar venture involving both the public and private sectors, is aimed at boosting Hong Kong's economy to unprecedented levels. Creating the perfect environment for all.[13] (Figure 6 Tsing Yi Station transportation map)

Competition to create a center, and then to become a new locus, informs developers' strategies. Two major transformations recently have given Hong Kong new directions for territorial development. The first was the construction of the new airport at Chek Lap Kok, on an artificial island, linked with Lantau Island and the New Territories by a series of gigantic bridges, a special MTR (Mass Transit Railway) express line which connects the airport to Central in twenty-three minutes, and a series of new stations/centers in between. The second will be the West KCR (Kowloon Canton Railway) line, which will connect the western part of the New Territories to Kowloon and the eastern line. These two extensions have engaged a series of natural islands and villages to become part of the development battle. The connections oblige them to support heavy developments, meaning either their complete disappearance or dislocation into another theme park.

13 © Villa Esplanada, Sun Hung Kai Properties.

**Fortress Island**

The height of the perimeter walls and the successive security gates, inspired by the medieval fortress model, increase the feeling of being isolated and well protected. As an extension of the wall, private, closed circuit surveillance is monitored from a central control room and can be viewed on residents' TV sets. Inside the electronic-gated system, each residential block lives as a bloated private enclave where the program of pleasures is engaged in a hostile relationship with the outside world. As Jeremy Rifkin suggests in *The Age of Access*,[14] the concept of property moves towards the notion of access to create new boundaries for clearly defined communities. New scenarios of living are about inclusion and exclusion since control, restrictions, and rules reinforce segregation. From the traditional notion of the production of a community through civic engagement, we now become agents in commercial transactions in order to become members of a selected community. This means sharing the same living conditions, prepackaged into a superior lifestyle:

> Residents at Grand del Sol enjoy a superior lifestyle, with the help of state-of-art innovations such as the Grand del Sol contactless smart card, which allows you to pass freely through the main entrance, clubhouse and car park, and the Perimeter Defense System, which enhances your security. Additional benefits at Grand del Sol include special garbage treatment facilities and an LED display board for the most up-to-date traffic and weather information.[15]

**The VIP Society**

*24-Hour Service*

To alleviate the stress of a dense urban living environment, each enclave is equipped with a full range of services for its hyper-refined residents. These facilities replicate the style and organization of a palatial hotel in order to offer them what the promoters call *VIP therapy.* These 24-hour services generally include baby-sitting, maid, laundry, emergency home repair, newspaper and magazine delivery, clubhouse, limousine, car park, maintenance and car wash, and a shuttle bus service. Some of the latest developments even go a step further with their complete exclusion and autonomy from the immediate urban area, employing a team of doctors and tutors to look after residents. With a special hotline, they can centralize each service to their apartment:

> Royal Peninsula revolutionises luxurious residential living enjoyment, with the avant-garde "Concierge-Plus Home Services" surpassing 5-star hotels. Through the unique **Royal Touch**® hotline, residents can access over 30 services with the touch of a button.[16]

For Rifkin, the tendency to multiply services appeared with the passage from conventional ownership to leasing. The formula—

14 Jeremy Rifkin, *The Age of Access* (London: Penguin, 2000).

15 © Grand del Sol, Sun Hung Kai Properties.

16 © Royal Peninsula, Sun Hung Kai Properties.

"Everything is a service" [17]—has encouraged developers to augment their profit from selling a flat with the trade of innumerable services. Management and membership fees, usually up to ten percent of the monthly rental value (rental value: HK$50,000, and fees of HK$5,000 with a year-equivalent deposit), establish a long-term relationship with developers. Even buyers to some extent exchange their positions as owners to become eternal customers.

*E-Living*

Developed for command and control, the e-network is another key feature added to enhance the home package:

> Laguna Verde makes effective use of modern technology to make your life completely hassle-free. With our e-living service, residents have ready access to a wealth of knowledge, news and entertainment fed directly to their home through fibre optics. Our Smart card system allows easy access to the entrance lobby and car park and can also be used to pay your management fees. Clubhouse facilities and Lifestyle Plus services are also available through the online reservation system.[18]

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

***The Clubhouse***

The relationship between recreation and living places the clubhouse at a key position, as an articulation between the podium and the apartment. Open only to members, it emphasizes the notion of a luxury hotel as a model for mass housing, with recreational programs and sports—meaning physical culture and relaxation. Detached from the street level, the podium's roof is designed as an outdoor theme park, where a variety of recreational activities are organized, focused around its dominant feature, the swimming pool with its perfectly controlled atmosphere. Indoor activities are connected from the landscape garden to specific additional components or to the podium's inner bowels. Simulation and virtuality often are

17 Jeremy Rifkin, *The Age of Access,* 73.

18 © Laguna Verde. Cheung Kong Property Development Limited.

used to compensate for an evident lack of space for wider activities such as skiing or golf. Through technology, it now is possible to reproduce all situations, from the most natural to the most artificial. The Belcher's advertising brochure gently unfolds this peaceful dream:

> When your busy days draw to an end, you may revel in the delights of the all-weather deluxe clubhouse and landscaped gardens. Occupying a total area of 190,000 sq. ft. The Belcher's Club house offers all the amenities you would ever dream of. Sit on the deck and work on your tan. Take a dip in the 25m indoor swimming pool and wash away your life worries. Soothe yourself in the bubble-lounge spa or Jacuzzi. Let daily pressure evaporate in the sauna. Life could not be more relaxing. If you're looking for something more invigorating, give your body a boost in the gym, unique covered tennis court, putting green or the indoor multi-purpose hall.[19]

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

*Swimming Pool*

The swimming pool is the key feature of the development. As an essential element to the dream house concept, its commands a significant place in real-estate brochures. Negating existing water conditions in Hong Kong, Caribbean Coast recently has pushed the water theme to its limits. Its first clubhouse contains, among other activities:

> A landscaped deck with 120-metre artificial beach, an outdoor swimming-pool, two children's pools, a Jacuzzi, a 25 metre indoor swimming-pool, 5 Japanese Spas, 2 Health centres, several Japanese timber steam cabinets, a foot massage area, sand baths, a therapeutic health system.[20]

As a major location for social activities, the swimming pool refers to the resort and to the impression of being on holiday 365 days a year. It receives particular attention in terms of design—its shape, the choice of decorative motives, the color of its tiles, and the surrounding landscape are ingeniously selected. In Caribbean Coast, an art deco architectural style in New York or a Roman classical swimming pool, are among the promises on offer to the occupants.

19 © The Belchers. Sun Hung Kai Properties.

20 © Caribbean Coast. Cheung Kong Property Development Limited.

Figure 7a and 7b
Large and small apartments floor plans. "The private apartment appears as the last refuge from massive development."
© Gutierrez + Portefaix

**1/8 Harmony**

*The Apartment*

The private apartment appears as the last refuge from massive development. It no longer matters if the dwelling space is minimal, since each inhabitant is free to use the entire complex as an extension of his/her own space. As a result of the maximum optimization of the tower plan, the 1/8 harmony cell is the minimum unit capable of being systematized in any scheme, like eight individual houses tacked onto a central core on each floor. The logic of the plan is very simple. A typical apartment layout comprises a living/dining room, kitchen, one or two bathrooms, two or three bedrooms—all accommodated within approximately 550–800 square feet. (Figure 7) Efficiency rates of floor areas are maximized by the reduction of circulation and living spaces. The Royal Ascot advertisement brochure clearly describes the harmonious coherence from outside to inside:

> Spaciousness is a distinguishing aspect of Royal Ascot. Expansive views are complemented by gracious, uncluttered interiors. Quality fittings and finishes create an atmosphere of tranquillity and refinement. Unique architectural highlights accentuate the airy spaciousness of a more than 300 sq. ft. living/dining area and a master bedroom of more than 200 sq. ft. With an efficient usable floor plan of up to 87%, here is an environment to be savoured and filled with happy moments of harmony and delight.[21]

This ratio assumes that the gap between public and private residential development has widened since the former is still based on 70 sq. ft. per person. With an average of 150 sq. ft. per person, the private sector offers quite generous apartments by Hong Kong standards, but still inferior to the 200 to 250 sq. ft. per person in China. The use of the façade as an effective limit to support an alveolar thickness is seen as another space expanding strategy.

21 © Royal Ascot. KCRC and Sun Hung Kai Properties

Figure
Belcher homes "The height of the perimeter walls and the successive security gates inspired by the medieval fortress model, increase the feeling of being isolated and well protected."
© The Blechers, Sun Hung Kai Properties, Ltd.

*A Showpiece*

The living/dining area is regarded as a showpiece. In addition to expensive materials, imported brand-name products are used for fixtures and settings, becoming the final touch of a luxurious modern life style. The Belcher's advertises the meticulousness of its architects and designers:

> Stepping inside your apartment you will experience an unparalleled combination of splendour and elegance. Each apartment is fitted with 18K gold plated tiles and the Belcher's is reserved for the most discerning few. [22] (Figure 8)

Theatrically coded elements of décor complete the show. A decorative golden grid with lion head, sculpted door locks, a maximum of mirrors, crystal luster, aquarium, and plasma screen, all are introduced to make the living room more substantial. Conventional wisdom has disappeared in order to promote the image of a stereotyped Western culture, both delocalized and atemporal. Usually assuming the function of entrance and centralizing the distribution of the entire flat, the living/dining room is the interface between public (image provided for the collective) and private (family members).

*The Bedroom*

The master bedroom—a private capsule that articulates multiple services, hi-tech comfort, and sensorial gratification—is the ultimate private space in the complex. With the bed representing the most irreducible place, the concept of a cocoon becomes real: "Far removed from a work-weary world the peacefulness of your new home brings harmony to your life."[23]

22 © The Belchers. Sun Hung Kai Properties.

23 © Villa Athena. Sun Hung Kai Properties

**Conclusion for the New Strategic Living**

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

# Interior Design in Hong Kong: A Practice in Transition

Cecilia Chu

**Introduction**

This paper arises out of a collective frustration shared by myself and many other Hong Kong interior designers faced with growing pressures in their practice. By examining the development of interior design in Hong Kong, its significance, controversies and current challenges, I will attempt to unfold the limitations and potentialities of a profession that, despite having tremendous impact in shaping our everyday environment, too often is marginalized. In addressing these issues, my intention is to seek a deeper understanding of the nature of interior design in Hong Kong, and further much-needed inquiry into the profession and its practices.

Speak to any interior designer in Hong Kong, and you are likely to hear that the practice has had its day. Confronted by in tense competition and weak demand under a prolonged economic downturn, many interior designers have become pessimistic about their future in the once dynamic economy. The common view is that the weak economy is the root cause of all the problems. Interior design in Hong Kong historically has relied heavily on monetary growth and market positioning for its popularity.[1] But many interior designers feel that this view is too simplistic and masks more troubling issues.

Designers have been struggling, not only to secure projects, but increasingly with the very process of designing. Common complaints include clients forcing unreasonable changes on their work, and ambitious contractors taking over their role. Of course, there also are the familiar Hong Kong problems of too little time, too tight a budget, and the constant demand for the new and the fanciful. The outcomes often are criticized for lacking originality and sophistication, being kitsch, or even downright tacky.[2]

This may seem like a gloomy scenario, and to be fair, there is a handful of talented designers whose work has won them praise at home and abroad. Yet problems are widespread. Behind the familiar faces of star designers are many that struggle with the daily stresses of over hectic deadlines, exhaustion of ideas, unending compromises, overwork and under pay. All this seems inherent in the life of the average Hong Kong interior designer, who also is fighting to gain respect for a profession that often is seen as less

1 This perspective on the state of the Hong Kong interior design industry is partially based on a series of interviews with interior designers in Hong Kong in early 2002. They included designers working in the three major interior design sectors: hospitality, residential, and corporate interiors, as well as members representing the Hong Kong Interior Designers Association (HKIDA).

2 This view might seem too harsh, but it has been widespread. See, for example, Liam Fitzpatrick', "Why Hong Kong Is so Ugly?" in *Eastern Express* (February 18–19, 1995).

legitimate and secondary to the more established disciplines of architecture and engineering.

When asked to reflect on these difficulties, most designers tend to blame Hong Kong as being too commercial, and its population as being insufficiently "educated" to appreciate interior design's potential for adding value at a various levels. Many envy designers in other countries who are perceived as having more time and space to create quality work and gain more recognition. Given the pragmatics of the highly market-driven context of Hong Kong, there seems very little hope in elevating interior design to a higher level. The causes of the problems are seen to be deeply ingrained and too complicated to be addressed systematically.

While it is easy to attribute problems to an external cause, nevertheless there is a discrepancy between interior design practice and its assumed "value" in Hong Kong. While almost all interior designers I interviewed voiced a desire to improve the quality of life, when pushed for detail, they were unwilling or unable to articulate this in practical terms. Despite growing pressures, there has been little debate on any level on the nature and changing priorities of interior design, nor are there initiatives to investigate its role in relation to other industries, and how and why society has changed its expectation of what interior design can provide. Interior designers in Hong Kong continue to perpetuate ideals that are at odds with the demands of clients, many of whom are unable to appreciate the designers' potential.

**Interior Design: A Practice of Disengagement?**

Part of this malaise can be traced to the negative connotations of interior design as mere decoration. Forms of interior design are ubiquitous in Western and Westernized countries, but its omnipresence often is overlooked, even within design discourse itself. Despite the ever-growing demand for design in homes, offices, shops, and restaurants, and the fascination with interior furnishings and glossy stylebooks, interior design remains a field in isolation.[3]

Why is it so difficult to affirm the value of an activity so closely intertwined with our everyday lives? There are at least two underlying reasons. The first is that, unlike architecture, interior design rarely is seen to encompass a social dimension or public purpose. The interior tends to be confined to the private and the enclosed, and is literally not expected to relate to what lies outside. This disengagement from the larger context has more or less left interior design as a self-contained practice that only addresses the interests of clients. The second is that any emphasis on the visual and the decorative makes it more difficult to justify benefits to the users. Compared with the design of products, furniture, transportation, and buildings, interior design is much less specific in defining its role. Most project statements tend to be vague (perhaps with the exception of large-scale projects which contain more technical

3 Until recently, there had been little academic writing devoted to the field of interior design (despite the existence of a multitude of how-to-do-it interior design texts and manuals). This phenomenon is parallel to the overriding emphasis on the technique of generating interior drawings, as opposed to theoretical inquiries, in most interior design schools.

descriptions), often repeatedly restating a general goal to "improve the functions and aesthetics of space." Also, the majority of "successful" interiors featured in books and magazines are appraised mostly for their visual appeal and choice of "styles," which are, of course, largely subjective. As Julia Lasky noted in a recent issue of *Interiors,* the lack of empirical studies and critical reviews of interiors makes it even harder for the professionals to justify the activity as valuable and relevant.[4] As a result, interior design can be relegated as "trivial" and "nonessential" and as making little lasting contribution to the larger culture. This disturbing phenomena, while to some extent common to interior design practice everywhere, takes on particular significance in the Hong Kong context which, as we will see, serves to deepen its disengagement and ultimately to push the practice towards a crisis.

**Designing Hong Kong**

Despite a long history of manufacturing arts and crafts products, design in Hong Kong (and indeed the surrounding regions of China) often is assumed not to have existed until the postwar boom years. Some misleading written histories, colonial education, and postwar trade policies have only recognized and promoted modern design from the West.[5] Design, whatever the area of professional activity, generally is understood solely as a Western import, one which represents idealistic images of modernity, progress, fashions and good taste that fires the aspirations of a population that continues to expect to gain upward mobility through the rapid accumulation of wealth.[6]

Under this dominant mindset, interior design largely has been viewed as an add-on service, or a form of packaging that serves to improve image, elevate status, and boost sales. As a result, Western-inspired designs, which carry strong symbolic meanings, often are superimposed arbitrarily on given spaces (as well as on furniture, products, fashion, and many building facades). Styles from a great variety of locales and periods are seen as a multiple-choice vocabulary available for application. This phenomenon is reflected in the many show apartments, where a range of different design themes are simultaneously displayed in equal-sized apartments to represent a range of life-style choices.[7] (Figure 1) The perception of design as a quick means to dress things up, and the emphasis on surface appearance, have resulted in the appearance of many quasi-Western style designs all over the city. (Figure 2)

Adding to the complication is a general perception that interior design, like Hong Kong itself, is transient.[8] There exists a constant impetus to renew, refurbish, and renovate, largely shaped by the economic and land policy [9] that renders Hong Kong's built environment impermanent. Continual demolition has come to be a way of life, and rarely is the design of an interior, especially in the commercial sector, expected to last more than few years before the

4 See Julia Lasky, "Gaining Critical Mass," *Interiors* (June 2001): 30.

5 Matthew Turner, "Early Modern Design in Hong Kong," *Design History: An Anthology* Dennis P. Doordan, ed. (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996), 201–2.

6 For more on this phenomenon see Helen Hau-Ling Cheng, "Consuming a Dream: Homes in Advertisements and Imagination in Contemporary Hong Kong" in *Consuming Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2001).

7 Ibid.

8 See Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (Hong Kong: The University of Hong Kong Press, 1997).

9 See Cecilia Chu and Kylie Ubergang, *Saving Hong Kong's Cultural Heritage,* a policy research paper written for the Civic Exchange, www.civic-exchange.org (Hong Kong: 2002).

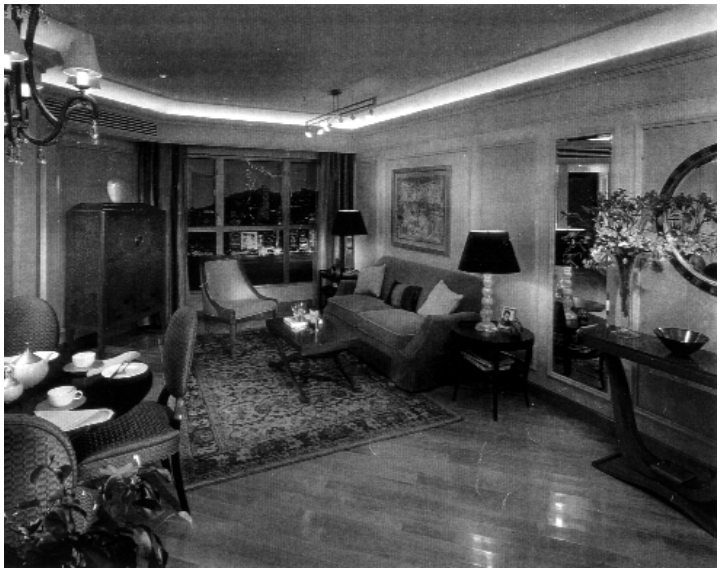

Figure 1
Hong Kong showflat at "The Waterfront," Wing Tai Asia Development, West Kowloon, Hong Kong, 2000.


Figure 2
Quasi-Western design in Hong Kong. Shopping mall signage, Heng Fa Chuen, Hong Kong , May 2002. Photo: Cecilia Chu.

building is demolished and refurbished all over again.[10] Even in the residential sector, the most speculative property market in the world encourages the population to change homes fairly regularly.[11] Interior design, therefore, like seasonal fashion, is regarded as a casual exercise in which a style or theme is introduced, used up and then shed like a skin to be replaced with a new and unrecognizable version of itself.

For a population with a strong group psychology, this tendency to pick up a trend and then discard it altogether only further reinforces the view that interior design is cosmetic, transferable and disposable. (The associated negative ecological impact and potential erosion of cultural roots cannot be discussed here, but should be noted). Interior design seems helplessly trapped in the realm of the trivial and in a state of self-perpetuation.

10 The Hilton Hotel in the Central district was a notable example of a building that was completely and expensively refurbished in the late 1990s, only to be torn down shortly after its completion when the site was sold and redeveloped as a high-rise office building.

11 See Helen Hau-Ling Cheng, "Consuming a Dream: Homes in Advertisements and Imagination in Contemporary Hong Kong," in *Consuming Hong Kong,*

Figure 3
Homogeneity in Hong Kong's design variation of the same style. Bamboo furniture—vernacular tradition meets contemporary style, Hong Kong, June 2002. Photo: Cecilia Chu.

**The "Design" of Design Knowledge**

As suggested earlier, one of the causes of this predicament relates to historical developments and an education system that has rejected local sources of originality and eradicated knowledge and understanding of Chinese culture that are able to provide potentially valuable sources and contexts for contemporary design.[12] Tony Fry has pointed out that the reciprocal relationship between how design is produced and consumed, learned and thought, inevitably will determine our perception of design.[13] In other words, our designed environment "designs" our thinking of design, ways to design, and beliefs in the values it carries. If we follow this suggestion, we can see how the highly disengaged, designed context of Hong Kong has continued to reinforce the view that design: must be imported from the West; market-driven; and a tool for consumption. These beliefs shape and effectively lower any expectations of design practice as an isolated, neutral, and purely commercial activity set apart from intellectual inquiry.

In his research on early design in Hong Kong, Matthew Turner reveals the high levels of indigenous design capability of Hong Kong designers, now largely forgotten.[14] Until the 1960s, when Hong Kong became the contemporary workshop of the world, design maintained strong links to China's long and rich aesthetic traditions. Designers in various fields, many of them trained in craft-based apprenticeships, were able to integrate and adapt traditional elements with those from other localities with a high degree of sophistication. This ability was reflected in a vast array of products and furnishings in which Western forms and motifs were synthesized with vernacular ones, resulting in unique adapted forms that always maintain subtle variations relating to their specific contexts and uses. (Figure 3)

Unfortunately, the roots of this indigenous adaptive design capability were severed with the closing of China under communist leadership, and with Hong Kong's subsequent politically and economically motivated shift to favor Western design in the late 1960s.[15] The achievements of early Hong Kong designers were quickly lost to a younger generation that had no opportunity to assimilate its own culturally situated tradition. In almost all areas

12 Turner, "Early Modern Design in Hong Kong," 210.

13 See Tony Fry, "The Placement, Displacement, and Replacement of Design" in *Form/Work* (Sydney: University of Technology) 1: 1 (October 1997).

14 See Matthew Turner, *Made In Hong Kong: A History of Export Design in Hong Kong, 1900–1960* (Hong Kong: The Urban Council, 1988).

15 Turner, "Early Modern Design in Hong Kong," 211.

of design and art, Western concepts became the dominant learning model, and established the universal principles for all designers.

Yet the rediscovery of Hong Kong's design history drew attention to a local tradition based around a contextual awareness that facilitates a subtle yet complex form of adaptation. The depth of this collective understanding of, and sensitivity to the relations between things, persons, and contexts, contrasts sharply with the design method employed in current interior design practice in which themes mainly are based on images in books and magazines. "Knowledge" of design, in this sense, equals knowing how to repackage visual elements. This also explains why sometimes a design theme can be literally reused in different projects by transferring it from one place to another (or from one presentation board to another). This reductive way of thinking-designing not only delimits the complexity embedded in the act of designing, but also relegates it to a technical skill to be learned in a highly linear manner.

**A Skill-Based Mentality**

In the present context of Hong Kong, the learning of design is strongly enhanced by the underlying desire to master a skill quickly in what was historically a fast-expanding economy, one where pragmatism always has been hailed as the key to success. Knowing the "right" way to achieve results often is seen as more important than exploring theories, which are regarded as impractical and too abstract to grasp. This attitude was further conditioned by the decades preceding the Asian financial crisis, when Hong Kong experienced a prolonged boom with rising prosperity, and when the mastery of basic drawing techniques and good marketing skills were enough to ensure success. Despite recent efforts and ideas being promoted in higher education to encourage conceptual thinking and the inclusion of more liberal arts subjects in design schools, a skill-based attitude towards design learning still is overwhelmingly dominant. As a result, interior design continues to be treated as a vocational subject by the majority involved in day-to-day practice.

However, this current model of learning, practicing, and thinking increasingly is being challenged due to a number of interconnected factors. The problem not only is the result of an economic downturn, but arises from a system that is unable to cope with the faster pace of change.

**Designing vs. Copying**

As discussed earlier, design in Hong Kong generally has been understood as a form of packaging (and repackaging) that serves to improve image. Each project is expected to distinguish itself from what already exists. The quest for the unique and the new, coupled with modern Western notions of progress, nevertheless is in conflict with the local design method of applying existing stylistic elements

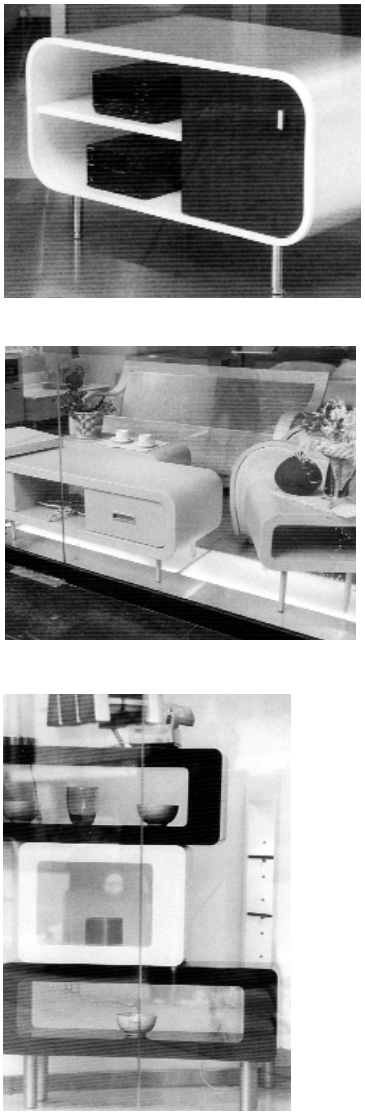

Figure 4
Examples of early adaptive design in Hong Kong. "Modern" furniture store display, Kowloon, Hong Kong, June. 2002. Photos: Cecilia Chu.

out of context. The inevitable result is superficial modifications of the point of reference and, instead of distinctiveness, there often is a strong tendency towards homogeneity, and variations of the same style. (Figure 4) This phenomenon is apparent in almost every field of design in which designers struggle daily to create something new and different demanded by a market filled with more and more design.

The issue of copying also must be mentioned as a reality which, over the years, has given a negative reputation to Hong Kong's creative industries. Why are designs constantly being copied? The most obvious answer, of course, is that it is a convenient way to produce something eye-catching and also "tried and tested" with little effort. The simple rule is to produce it quickly before someone else does. But while copying can be criticized as being unethical and lacking originality, what sometimes is overlooked is the fact that traditional Chinese learning is based on emulation.

By becoming familiar with the forms, styles, and techniques from the past, students could assimilate their essence and be able to transform it into something of their own. The objective was not the production of a distinctive work, but rather a continual process of relating and integrating things and techniques from the past with the present, in order to evolve into something different without necessarily breaking away from tradition.

But this creative adaptive ability, reflected in many early Hong Kong designs, has largely been lost in current practice oriented towards uniqueness and the consumption of the new. Western modernity has placed the subjective pressures of "originality" and "uniqueness" on the work of Hong Kong designers. But for Hong Kong designers, it is not simply copying or a lack of originality which makes much contemporary design appear superficial, but rather a lack of a culturally-embedded sensibility. Turner dates this "creative inferiority" to the 1960s, when Hong Kong increasingly turned away from its own traditions to modern Western design.[16] Many turned to copying Western styles in an attempt to combat the problem of competition, but they lacked the understanding of and engagement with their sources. It is a practice that has continued to mark Hong Kong design to this day.

**The Blessing and Threat of Technology**

Without the cultural grounding of indigenous practice, the problem of copying has become even more intensive in recent years as fast-advancing computer technology has enabled those with no previous design training to generate drafting and drawings (formerly a skill that interior designers were proud of). Trades related to interior design such as builders and furnishing suppliers now can produce professional-looking images based on existing designs. With the help of a draftsman, an acceptable design project can be prepared,

16 Matthew Turner, *Made In Hong Kong: A History of Export Design in Hong Kong 1900–1960* .

often faster than by employing a well-trained designer. This trend has been exacerbated by the emergence of new computer-enabled outsourcing companies that focus on specific tasks. Many are based in mainland China, and can offer extremely competitive services from presentation renderings to full packages of construction documents.[17] By employing staff with some background in art and design, they also can offer design input and help clients to quickly visualize simple ideas by copying from existing images.

This shift also means that some of the interior designer's responsibilities are being subsumed. As a consequence, interior design is further being relegated to a minor role in the building process. At worst, it is represented by a mere set of documents, which are readily available for purchase. The rise of technology, seen as a blessing by many trades, becomes a threat to interior designers when it is used as a shortcut that inevitably will lower professional standards.

Ironically, another difficulty is the rising interest in interior design among the Hong Kong public. The wider availability of information on the Internet, in bookshops, and furnishing showrooms is providing clients with an educated eye in styles and trends in interior design, or at least the perception of one. Thus, many people are becoming more confident in exercising their own design decision-making. Builders and suppliers are more than willing to help realize small-scale projects, without the involvement of an interior designer. And even large-scale commercial projects often relegate the interior designer to a coordinating role that demands constant compromises with other parties who continue to gain negotiating power in the design process. Inevitably, the design process has become fragmented, and to address this has had to undergo a number of structural changes that ultimately will work to alter its nature and future.

**Fragmentation of Design Practice**

The first change which has occurred is the downsizing of interior design firms. With their scope of work diminishing, they have to keep an economy of scale in order to survive. Indeed, the majority of the interior design firms have laid off a significant percentage of their staff within the last two years.[18] But while "lean and mean" seems to be an obvious strategy for survival under a difficult economic climate, it cannot counteract the fierce and growing competition coming from other fields.

A second change is the blurring of roles of those involved in the design process. Many designers who have lost full-time positions are beginning to work in other design-related fields, mostly as ad hoc freelancers. With the availability of these floating design resources, more and more contracting firms, retailers, property developers, and even real estate agencies in Hong Kong are beginning to set up their own, so-called design consultancies, offering

17 Many outsourcing companies of this kind can be found in Shenzhen, the neighboring city to Hong Kong. The proximity of their location, as well as the increasingly computerized nature of the work, makes their services convenient and competitive.

18 The exact magnitude of downsizing cannot be exactly determined at this time, but an industry expert estimated that close to three-quarters of Hong Kong interior design firms have laid off half of their staff in the past two years.

complete packages that include interior design as a "value-added" service. Increasingly, these once strategic partners of interior design firms are becoming their direct competitors, threatening to take over their business.

One, perhaps positive, aspect of these changes is that they allow interior design services to become more widespread and may, therefore, serve to help raise the general standards and perception of design in the long run. But, as stated above, sheer popularity alone cannot help change interior design. In order to establish a sound professional status, it must break away from its current role and redefine itself as an agent of change.

**Combating the Crisis**

Given the seemingly overwhelming challenges on every front, how can interior designers move forward and secure their professionalism? To be sure, designers are not wholly unaware of the need to upgrade their knowledge and improve their position, but where should these efforts be directed?

One widespread response to the difficulties in Hong Kong is direct and immediate: for designers to seek work in neighboring China, where there are enough projects in a market that still lacks sophisticated design skills. Hong Kong design firms are viewed on the mainland as a foreign service filling a gap in providing necessary expertise.[19] For them, moving into the China market can develop their knowledge base and expertise. However, this is a pool of work that may dry up fast. Mainland designers, eager to catch up with the world, are feverishly improving their skills and knowledge to an extent still largely underestimated by their Hong Kong counterparts.[20] With China's entry into the World Trade Organization, the capability of many Chinese industries is gaining strength. There is no doubt that, in the foreseeable future, designers from China, many of whom display a surprisingly deep understanding of cultural context in their thinking, will become significant competitors to Hong Kong designers.

A second strategy for dealing with the pressures of competition, one generally seen as a more long-term solution, is to further professionalize Hong Kong interior design practice. This would mean setting up more standards, rules, and restrictions, along with qualifying exams and codes of conduct to prevent those who are not properly trained to compete for work.[21] Formalizing the profession in this way will, it is hoped, help to raise standards, restrict the number of practitioners, and retain a recognition enjoyed by other established disciplines.

While this "classic" strategy may reduce some immediate competitive pressures and help to raise standards, it also carries the danger of perpetuating the status quo. As Francis Duffy has commented on architectural practice,[22] professionalism is primarily concerned with keeping things as they are, and tends to encourage

19 See *Design by Hong Kong: Interior Design,* a report published by the Hong Kong Trade Development Council which analyzes the export potential and competitiveness of Hong Kong's interior design services in the Chinese mainland market with respect to China's accession to the World Trade Organization (Hong Kong, October 2001).

20 In fact, many designers I interviewed have expressed this concern. Also, for a description of the growing capabilities of mainland designers, see "A Passage to Fuzhou" in *Contemporary Design* (Taipei, January 2002).

21 The professionalization of Hong Kong's interior design industry is one of the major targets currently being pursued by the Hong Kong Interior Designers Association.

22 See Francis Duffy, *Architectural Knowledge: An Idea of a Profession* (London: Routledge, 1998).

the maintenance of boundaries rather than fostering interdisciplinary exchange. The easy satisfaction gained from instituting a system of elitism can prevent reflection, and lead to oversimplification of problems, hence blocking the intellectual development of the profession as a whole.

Ultimately, although some individual designers may continue to excel, the future of interior design practice in Hong Kong lies neither with new market opportunities nor raising professional barriers, but in a redirected practice that understands design's potential role and impact, and can address the real concerns of a changing society. Interior design has to learn how to play a positive role in shaping the socio-cultural discourse, and in offering new solutions to the problems of living. Only by giving a new direction to practice can interior design begin to become truly relevant in Hong Kong.

**Towards a Redirected Practice**

Gui Bonsiepe has pointed out that the design professions in general have suffered from the symptom of "collective muteness," [23] and that designers have become accustomed to distancing themselves from social and intellectual inquiry. This is all the more prevalent in Hong Kong, where interior design practice evolved out of a skill-based mentality with deep mistrust of anything theoretical. A conditioned mindset, plus the constant demand for short-term answers to design problems, have made it particularly difficult for Hong Kong designers to operate intellectually.

As mentioned earlier, the skill-based approach to design has proved insufficient to address the rapid changes affecting Hong Kong. What matters is not simply the material and visual form of interior design, but its potential to reference cultural practices, habits, technologies, and social forms.[24] If interior design does not interact with these larger contexts, and is uncritical of its impacts and consequences, the role and respect of designers will diminish further.

Duffy suggests that for design practice to have a future, it must develop itself as a learning profession geared towards a more welcoming, inclusive approach to neighboring and allied disciplines.[25] As the boundaries of traditional design practice continue to shift and dissolve, a new design culture would have to be created through the sharing of knowledge by means of an ongoing discourse involving both users and designers. The more designers can understand the impact of their practice, and the more sensitive they are to the changing needs and priorities of design, the more likely that they can respond intelligently and critically without being subsumed under the forces of the market economy.

Clive Dilnot has remarked that design is not, as many would assume, about creating something new out of nothing, but about bringing change to something understood deeply.[26] Given that pure

23 See Gui Bonsiepe, "Some Virtues of Design" in Jan van Toorn, ed., *Design Beyond Design* (Netherlands: Jan van Eyck Akademie Editions, 1997), 106.

24 See Gert Salle, "On a Dialogue of Design: On the Disappearance and Re-emergence of Design" in a catalog for the touring exhibition *Design Now. Austria* (Vienna, 2001).

25 See Francis Duffy, *Architectural Knowledge*.

invention is rare, and that new designs always arise to some extent from reconstituting what exists, then alternatives can be sought within the framework of things. To follow this line of thinking, interior designers would need to stop focusing on producing the unique and the new, and seek to discover what has been concealed. Interior design, in this sense, can be seen as a conscious act of intervention into the world, able to generate new sets of relations that are not reliant upon or subject to copying. The recognition of translation as a mode of designing potentially could offer a new path for Hong Kong interior design practice to reemerge as a "practice of engagement."

But to grasp the skill of translation, interior designers need to develop a high degree of sensitivity to what lies outside the realm of their often enclosed world, and let themselves be influenced by the new and unfamiliar. A parallel can be found in the creative adaptive efforts of early Hong Kong designers who were able to synthesize traditions and foreign influences, and adapt with ease to new materials and technology.[27] The achievements of these early designers starkly contrast with the work of a new generation struggling to "innovate," but also hint at vast resources for contemporary design. This does not mean that we should return to the past. Yet the reaffirmation of an earlier indigenous design capability, and the reexamination of the products and process, offers us a potential starting point for current practice to be redirected.

Hong Kong's reunification with China in 1997 coincided with the beginning of a period of prolonged economic stress, which has afflicted interior design as well as so many other industries, businesses, and professions. Although designers have tried to expand their service to mainland China and raise professional standards in the hopes of overcoming competition, this alone cannot address the more fundamental difficulties undermining the viability status and centrality of the profession. If interior design hopes to step out of its current predicament, and establish itself as a "relevant" profession, designers need to establish a contemporary contextual awareness, as well as develop an intellectual capacity that enables them to question, rather than simply "solve," problems and possibilities, and to overturn existing models when necessary. If interior designers can, through these new capabilities, move beyond a market-oriented and skill-based approach, then it may be possible in time for interior design to be seen as relevant, valuable, and indeed, essential to Hong Kong's future.

26 Ideas developed here were borrowed from a series of lectures delivered by Clive Dilnot at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University in 1999.

27 A good example showing these abilities is the introduction of plastics in the 1950s, which resulted in a great diversification of products. Plastics, as Turner explains, had "become the China Trade ceramics of the twentieth century, and design became an everyday expression." Turner, "Early Modern Design in Hong Kong," 207.

# Culture-Based Knowledge Towards New Design Thinking and Practice—A Dialogue

Benny Ding Leong in conversation with Hazel Clark

For the benefit of the reader, it should be explained that this paper is presented as a dialogue to represent our ongoing conversations. In effect, the dialogue began in 1999 when we constructed a new course for the MA in Design the students at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, which explored the potential of designing from the basis of cultural knowledge and understanding. Benny Ding Leong, a Hong Kong-based designer, had been using this concept in his teaching of product design to undergraduate students, as well as in his own work. The strategy is in the process of refinement and the directions chosen are inevitably selective, but the potential it offers could be significant, not merely for Hong Kong and China, but on a much wider scale.

**Hazel Clark**

**HC**: We should begin by exploring what brought you to what you have called an "East-West" approach to design. While you are not unique in this, the majority of designers living and working in Hong Kong fail to engage with Chinese culture and tradition, preferring to espouse "modernity" or "global" design.

**Benny Ding Leong**

**BL**: There were three stages of evolution in my exploration of traditional Chinese culture as a premise for contemporary design. They were influenced by my studies in Hong Kong, and later at the Royal College of Art (RCA) in London and also in Europe.

The first stage took the form of doubts about the fundamental meaning of (product) design, which began when I was a student at the Hong Kong Polytechnic in the mid 1980s. Postmodernism was the leitmotif in design; the greatest influence was from Memphis in Italy and postmodern architecture in the United States. Professional design practice appeared to be becoming immersed in radically individualized consciousness. But the resulting products did not strike me as creative or meaningful. I enjoyed the activity of designing, and I appreciated things that embraced function or had a meaningful story. I had little sympathy for much contemporary design that concentrated on life style variations or served merely as markers of personal style and taste.[1] Also, I was becoming increasingly aware of rapid object obsolescence; that is of things without any absolute values. To me, this was a betrayal of the value of

1 "... the cultural movement away from homogeneity towards variation. Within mass production, theories of standardization began to be replaced by ideas of batch production within which cultural variation was possible," Penny Sparke, *Design in Context* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Ltd., 1987), 211–212.

design. I ended my undergraduate studies in Hong Kong longing to uncover examples of more meaningful design—but where was I to find them?

**HC**: Was it at that point that you began to develop your awareness of what it meant to be living in Hong Kong—a British colony on Chinese soil, which, it had then been decided, would be repatriated with China in July 1997?

**BL**: I guess it was, and it led to the second stage, which was the beginning of my study of Chinese culture shortly before I left for England. I had to choose a research theme in preparation for studying at the RCA. Somewhat coincidentally, in 1986, I had come across a splendid book, *The Affection of Ming Furniture*, by Wang ShiXiang, published in Chinese the previous year. The ingenious Ming dynasty furniture and the prescient design philosophy captured my total attention and imagination, seeped into my mind and pulled me into moments of deep thought. Even though I had been living in Hong Kong more than twenty years, this was a revelation that completely altered my shallow comprehension of traditional Chinese design. A subsequent literature search revealed a wealth of invaluable knowledge that was waiting to be uncovered in traditional Chinese artifacts.

This led to the third and the most significant stage of my voyage of discovery which began soon after I arrived in England late in 1987. My studies at the RCA and an internship in The Netherlands reconfirmed my belief that homogeneous Western design thinking should be revised and reoriented, and that traditional Chinese creative thinking might provide an alternative.

**HC**: I can appreciate you being drawn to Ming furniture, which often is described as "timeless" and "classic." However, this also made me reflect on how much of the recent "Chinese style" design available in Hong Kong and internationally has been based on imagery from the Qing dynasty. This is not surprising since this period is close to us in time and, in that sense, is more familiar and easier to access. But it begs the question of what can and should be the point of cultural access—should it only rely on the visual, or must it also encompass the philosophical? Where did you begin?

**BL**: The point of access can vary from person to person. However, no matter where you start, either from the visual or philosophical, one should encompass some basic understanding of the other. For example, a leading Chinese architect and scholar, Liang Ssu C'heng was the first person to make a very thorough and systematic study of traditional Chinese architecture. He did a formal analysis of formats, traits, and design principles based on actual material objects, while developing a rich understanding of ancient Chinese thinking. Personally, I took a "philosophical" and, what I call, an "immaterial" route to understand basic Chinese thinking and reasoning;

recognizing that the Western definition of philosophy was not transferable to ancient China. This led me to study some of the earliest writings dating back to between the Xia dynasty and the Warring States period (circa 2000–221 B.C.). They included the *I Ching* or Book of Changes, the *Analects* of Confucian thinking, and the Taoist *Dzao Te Ching*. Writing from the period circa 770 to 221 B.C., the so called Chinese enlightenment proved to be most essential to my search for fundamental cognitive traits[2] that affected conscious and unconscious perceptions of life, matter, nature, and human relationships.

**HC**: How did this relate to your design studies?
**BL**: While I was studying in Europe, a lot of interest was developing in "eco-design" that led to a questioning of the roles and responsibilities of the industrial designer. Propositions such as, "back to basics," "re-humanization," and "neo-functionalism" were being advocated in product design. I was fortunate to be exposed to these new ideas, but, at the same time, I also was aware of a growing materialism and technological orientation in European design. My empirical knowledge of contemporary European design made me question its very role, and nourished my interest in studying culture —particularly traditional Chinese culture. I believed that cultural knowledge could enrich contemporary design theory and underpin innovation in design practice, providing an alternative to Western[3] design that would have international application.

**HC**: Did you feel that this approach would be appealing in contemporary China? It's ironic that while Westerners, like myself, are drawn to Chinese culture, in Hong Kong and the mainland, Western culture often is much more desirable as being advanced and "modern." Do you feel that your roots in Hong Kong, and your experiences studying and working in Europe, enable you to respond objectively to Chinese tradition and culture as well as to Western modernity?
**BL**: Yes, but I also recognize that in today's pragmatic world people can choose what is valuable to them. This applies to culture. China once possessed very original design methodology, which was embraced by millions of people over thousand of years, but this became forgotten over the last two centuries for historical, economic, political, and cultural reasons. Any success in revitalizing methods from the past must depend on their perceived contemporary value. There are many academics who cherish cultures other than their own. The point of entry is, for me, less important than the desire to be enriched by greater cultural awareness and understanding.

2 According to Hai-guang Yin there are four interrelated traits within all cultures: normative, materialistic, artistic, cognitive. (Hai-guang Yin, *The Prospect of Chinese Culture, Part 1* (Taiwan: Laureate Publishing Company, 1988, 74–76).

3 "Westernization" here is home to science, democracy, rationalism, freedom, and individuation; and poses universalism as a value that has become identified as the "social solvent" of most developed countries today. For some developing countries that have strong local cultures, such as China and India, a struggle evolves between ideals of particularism and universalism. For many Chinese scholars such as Dao Wei Ming (a representative of new Confucianism), the realization and identification of the contemporary value of "particularity" in traditional Chinese culture is a significant step towards its preservation and promotion as a "universal" concept. Dao Wei Ming, *Decade Awaiting Confucianism –The Re-evaluation of the Eastern Asia's Value* [in Chinese] (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press Ltd., 1999), 12–14.

**HC**: So where did you begin?
**BL**: I began by attempting to identify specific cognitive traits in traditional Chinese culture, and used contemporary Western culture as a relative opposite, optimized in Hong Kong as what might be termed a place of cultural bifurcation. To do this, I had to formulate a guiding set of values: the first relates to the issue of subjectivity (and to the development of a "new subjectivity"), the second to comparative cognition, or objectivity, and the third involves the inevitable process of acculturation:[4]

i A discernment of the basic traits of Chinese culture (sufficient to provide a methodological starting point);
ii Forming a holistic picture of the other (i.e., contemporary Western culture, as a point of comparison for traditional Chinese culture); and
iii Seeking examples of the interpenetration of the Chinese and Western culture (as evident in Hong Kong and in developed mainland cities).

**HC**: Are you saying that you studied aspects of Chinese tradition and culture initially, but that Hong Kong was a subsequent and separate point of reference?
**BL**: Yes, I believed it necessary to look at Hong Kong and China separately when responding to the three points above. While I studied traditional culture from China, in Hong Kong I looked at both traditional and contemporary culture, [see (iii) above], and also how the local meets the global. Although this was an exogenous, passive, and unconscious process in which Hong Kong originated in China, but evolved during a century of colonial rule, it provided a concrete case study from which to reflect on the evolution of China. Simultaneously, Hong Kong provides a significant point of departure for the conscious development of a new design theory based on Chinese culture.

**HC**: How would you describe your approach?
**BL**: My approach is clearly a theoretical one, based on assumptions and hypotheses, with the China-Hong Kong connection as a unique starting point.

**HC**: Can this be described as an attempt to develop a new Hong Kong subjectivity in design and design thinking?
**BL**: I am attempting to develop a "greater China" subjectivity, predicated on the study of contemporary culture in Hong Kong and traditional Chinese culture. Studying both reveals a fresh viewpoint, what I call a "mac-micro" view, where Hong Kong is seen as a microcosm of "macro" China.[5] This facilitates a wide cultural examination intended to enrich design thinking in Hong Kong and in the "new China."

4 Acculturation can be read as "cultural exchange" to describe the process and characteristics of how two cultures meet and what alternation may evolve. (Hai-guang Yin, *The Prospect of Chinese Culture, Part 1* (Taiwan: Laureate Publishing Company, 1988).

5 The concept of "mac-micro" is inspired by the term "macro-history" of the book *China: A Macro Histroy* by the Chinese historian, Ray Hunag in 1993. According to Huang the term "macro-history" referred to the general theory of "macro" & "micro" economics.

6 A. L. Kroeberand and Clyde Kluchohn, *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions* (Cambridge, MA: The Papers of the Peabody Museum, 1952) 40–49.

7 The normative trait comprises the cautious "prescriptions" of values, conducts and expressions of thought prescribed by a particular way of thinking / perception. Ethics and morality can be seen as the aggregated manifestation of this trait. Hai-guang Yin, *The Prospect of Chinese Culture, Part 1*, 74–76.

8 The three elements provide the nuclei of a proposed new Chinese design model. They are "core-knowledge" (cultural cognition), "criteria" (value orientation), and "methods" (strategic integration). Dr. H. Clark and B. D. Leong, "Culture Based Knowledge Towards New Design Thinking and Practice," Conference Proceedings, *Useful and Critical, International Conference* (Helsinki UIAH, September 1999).

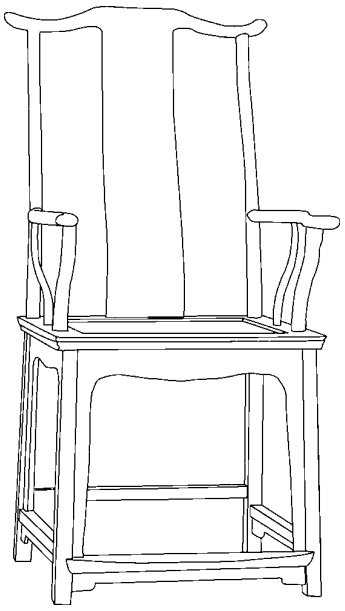

Figure 1
The Ming dynasty "Officers Cap" chair.
Illustration by Joce Chan.

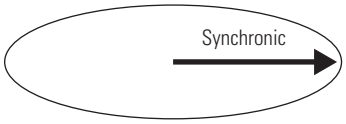


Figure 2
The role of design across societies and generations.

**HC**: This is a potentially enormous task. How did you refine your exploration of Chinese culture? Was it simply what appealed to you, for example your response to Ming furniture, or something more objective?

**BL:** "Chinese culture" here focuses on the study of cognitive traits, although I accept that they can be difficult to pinpoint, being, on the one hand, essential, but on the other an immaterial concept. An example is Ming furniture, and my particular favorite the Officer's Cap chair, which underpinned Confucian notions of people as a social dyad. (Figure 1) Normative rites or etiquette are demonstrated through the material traits of the chair itself, that is its formal and structural design. For me the chair realizes the idea of design predicated on human values, which relates to my earlier studies of traditional Chinese creativity.

**HC**: Can you explain this in more detail?

**BL**: The core of any culture is constructed on traditional concepts, specifically its value system [6] which contributes substantially to its normative trait.[7] Value orientation, along with cultural cognition and strategic integration, is one of three key components that can underpin a theory of design, as we have discussed elsewhere.[8] As design criteria, value orientation embraces the following:

i ***Life-centering***: designing from a human and cultural perspective for the well-being of living organisms;

ii ***Totality***: where the well being of a society takes precedence over that of the individual. Design is based on human solidarity and respect seen from the "horizontal" or synchronic (familial and societal) and the "vertical" or diachronic (cross-generational) perspectives (Figure 2);

iii ***Reflectivity***: in allowing situations to reveal themselves in terms of design requirements rather than imposing design onto a given situation, and thus enabling users to participate actively in the formation and definition of functions, utilization, and in the relationships between artificial systems and material things; and

iv ***Unification***: through the relationship of human activity, "natures," [9] and technology as a totality to reorient and liberate human beings from the contemporary reification of technological objects. This will be a new process that I call the "spiritualization of science and technology."

**HC**: What is the cultural base for this thinking?

**BL**: Its roots can be traced to Confucianism, Taoism, and ancient literature, specifically the *I Ching* (begun c. 3000 B.C. and completed c. 2000 B.C., the *Analects*, and the *Dao Te Ching* (the Warring States period c. 500–300 B.C.).

9 "Natures" here refers to the concept of a "multiplicative nature," which I recently advocated. There are three natures (unified as one): The "first" or organic nature—the only one, untouched or being retouched by humans; the "second" or artificial nature—the world and society, which is constructed by humans with natural or modified materials, and the "third" or virtual nature—a nonphysical world which is programmed by bit and byte, and can be used to "distort" and "condense" perceptions of reality.

**HC**: Would it always be necessary to start from ancient thought?
**BL**: No, but all civilizations are the manifestations of lengthy processes of acculturation whereby original concepts, cognition, and thinking inevitably are distorted or lost. To go back to origins is to attempt to revitalize ideas and concepts that we are unaware of or that may have become obscure over time. Such cultural subjectivity should not be regarded as xenophobia, but rather as a search for an alternative to the prevailing system of universal values.

**HC**: Could you clarify how you approached this very complex process?
**BL**: My investigation led me to explore the "inner" levels[10] of ancient Chinese culture that explores the "ultimate-nature" of the world, seen as obscured by contemporary rationality and intellect. This proposes that intuition is one of three ways to perceive being and the world. Z. M Liang, refers to Buddhism as providing three cognitive capacities for human perception of the world: "sensation," "intuition," and "intellect."[11] While ancient India developed a unique metaphysic out of sensation, China focused more on the life-centered "intuition," and ancient Greece resolved the ultimate questions of nature and the self by means of intellect and rationality.

**HC**: Such cultural shorthand, while revealing, also might be criticized for essentializing cultural traits. Could this be seen as a problem with your approach?
**BL**: I don't feel this, because I am not approaching my study as a philosopher, but to provide a point of departure for new design knowledge and new strategies in design thinking. My study of the "inner" levels of cultures, allowed me to uncover fundamental streams of cognition that became normative traits which, in their own time, laid the groundwork for the development of a distinctive material culture.

**HC**: But how can they be applied to our contemporary situation?
**BL**: These three streams of cognition coexisted and predated the modern period, when intellect and rationality gained superiority. At a metaphorical level, they offer three distinct strategies to approach design problems:

1 The transcendent—with sensation as the cognitive mode;
2 The harmonious—where intuition cooperates with rational cognition; and
3 The progressive—with intellect as the major cognitive mode.

The *Transcendent* strategy is one of avoiding present problems in search of, so-called "scientific" methods[12] to focus on "self transcendence," "deep consciousness," and "inner spirit" facilitated through methods such as yoga and meditation.

10 When discussing culture from the perspective of "time" and "space." Xing-liang He divides what he calls "cultural space" into three structural levels: the external, tangible and visible "outer level"; the "middle level" of human behavior rites, and regulations in the form of words and language; and the "inner level" of the manifestation of human ideologies. (Xing-liang He: *The Worship of Chinese Gods of Nature*, (Shunghi: San-Lian book store [Shanghai Branch) (in Chinese), 1992, 3–10.)

11 See Liang Zou Ming, *Philosophies of Eastern and Western Culture* (in Chinese) (Taiwan: Le Ran Book Publishing Co., 1983), 63.

12 For instance, meditation is perceived as a very scientific and unique means of self-enlightenment—an alternative cognitive science. Dr. Daniel Goleman and Dr. Robert A.F. Thurman, eds., *Mind Science—An East-West Dialogue* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1991).

The *Harmonious* strategy originated in ancient China. Instead of reorganizing the physical world, it dealt with inner human feelings and tried to find the point of equilibrium between man, matter and nature (the Tao), and concentrated on "collective humanity" and "internal ethics."

The *Progressive* strategy was adopted by most modern societies, and became the prevailing Western mode of thinking or cognition. Originating in Ancient Greek philosophy, it became a survival mechanism against nature, resolved in the material and through rational thought.

The three streams did not occur diachronically. In the West, the "progressive" strategy was abandoned around the fourth century BC. and replaced by spiritual transcendence in an attempt to salvage decay in the rational world through the religious power from Judaism. It was not until the end of the medieval period that the progressive strategy was readopted consciously by the Western world. Ancient China and India, by contrast, applied the progressive strategy in establishing their agriculture five thousand years ago, and developed the other two strategies later.

If civilizations are perceived organically,[13]
three common aspects become evident:

1 The physical or material;
2 The social; and
3 The spiritual.

They represent a logical growth and the temporal progress of wants and needs. Material production initially takes the form of food, dress, and dwelling, then the management of communal resources and social knowledge and finally in spiritual enhancement, or the transcendence of materiality and the search for ultimate values. But over time, each comes to coexist in parallel, and that is the stage at which we find ourselves today in the Westernized world.

Therefore, my proposal of an alternative design cognition based on traditional Chinese thinking developed in response to the complex interrelationships that underpin modern society as a whole.[14] The choice of a new design strategy is not about aggressive "progression," and spiritual "transcendence," but about strength-gathering and harmonization, to counter the issues that are byproducts of the speeding techno-economic machine of the world. My study defined the following areas of investigation for product design:

1 "Value" in design—generated by the value systems of the given culture;
2 "Macro-relations"—a combination of the collective behavior of users, the interaction of users and objects, and the interrelationship of users, objects, and environments; and
3 "Micro-relations"—of design interfaces or ergonomics among users, objects, and environments.

13 My favorite analogy of the development of a culture and its civilization resemble the physical and mental growth of a human being. (Cf. O. Spengler, Arnold Toynbee, and P. A. Sorokin's belief that culture is an "organic" entity).

14 This is echoed by the saying "the problem of the twentieth century is a human-centered problem ..." Dao Wei Ming, *Decade Await of Confucianism—The Re-evaluation of the Eastern Asia's Value* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press [in Chinese] Ltd., 1999), 48.

15 The three levels of study referred to hypotheses, theories, methods, and tools:
(A) At the level of "value," I advocated the idea of "value orientation" in product design thinking and practice. It is an ideology of setting appropriate directions or criteria for design, based on a set of more ethical and humanistic cultural values (revived from traditional Chinese culture).
(B) "Macro-relations" led to experiments with the concept of "Relational Analysis," i.e., the methodology which emphases the process of research and the analysis of five key elements (people, place, time, objects, and circumstances or matters identified in the Book of Changes—*I Ching*—three thousand years ago,) in designing products and services.
(C) "Dualistic interaction" is a peculiar concept, posited during my initial study at the level of "micro-relation." It concerns a new cognition of man-machine interfaces other than "ergonomic" and "human engineering." Inspired by Taoism, "dualistic interaction" proposed "harmonization" (Tao) as the ultimate goal of the interface of humans and artificial objects. The key objectives and foci of the study were: the identification of "yin" (the active) and "yang" (the passive)—the two key agents of interaction between objects and the human body; and finding the point of equilibrium.

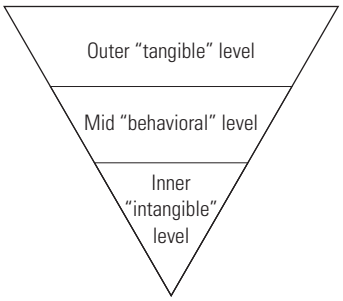


Figure 3
The "spatial perspective" of culture.

I set what was, to me, a workable time frame of three years to investigate each area, and to devise theories and methods, or tools, for designing products.[15]

**HC**: Can you explain this further?
**BL**: To me, verification was as important as the establishment of the theoretical model. So I formulated a series of design events and projects as a means of validating my hypotheses, methods, and tools. Chief among these was the *Things East-West* design exhibition, which was the most comprehensive and systematic of my design experiments.[16] Based on research begun in 1994, it addressed the first level of value. In the early stages, at times the research was perplexing and bewildering, because there were many pragmatic questions relating to materials, approaches, and point of departure.

**HC**: How then did you select your methods and research tools?
**BL:** I began with the "spatial perspective of culture" devised by He.[17] This was followed by the "goal-attainment" process, in which I drew my analogy from archery. Finally, I arrived at the "cultural integration" design method, which helped to clarify the design approach.

**HC**: Can you provide more details of these methods and tools?
**BL**: He's "spatial perspective of culture" provided a manageable framework (Figure 3) to visualize and capture the fluid concept of culture, and helped me to identify the research focus. Using this framework, I concentrated the research on to the "inner" level of traditional Chinese culture. This led to the formation of the concept of "value orientation," and hence the consolidation of the four key criteria:

1 Life-centering,
2 Totality,
3 Reflectivity,
4 Unification.

**HC**: I can see that the perspective of "cultural space" offered a simple framework for the study of culture, but did it provide sufficient tools for directing the focus of the research?
**BL**: No, the "cultural space" framework alone was not adequate. Next, I developed a matrix model (Figure 4) to replace He's "layers." It is a more elaborated and embracive tool, constructed on a vertical axis from the material to the immaterial, and a horizontal one from behavior to thought to form four quadrants of cultural space that equate with the four general axes of the research:

1 Material/design, style (a particular physical form, or generated from a certain philosophy or ideology),
2 Behavior, the individual acts and social interactions affected by using artifacts,

16 The *Things East-West* design exhibition was held in Hong Kong, China in 1999. The exhibits were concerned with the "revitalization" of traditional Chinese creative practices and emerging modern Western thinking. Thirteen experimental designs were shown as the preliminary outcome of five years of research. Every piece was an experiment in the creative conception of traditional cultural "revitalization" and the application of "cultural integration" strategies. See Clark and Leong, "Culture-Based Knowledge Toward New Design Thinking and Practice."

17 Xing-liang He is a cultural anthropologist and the author of *The Worship of Chinese Gods of Nature*. See also Note 10 above.

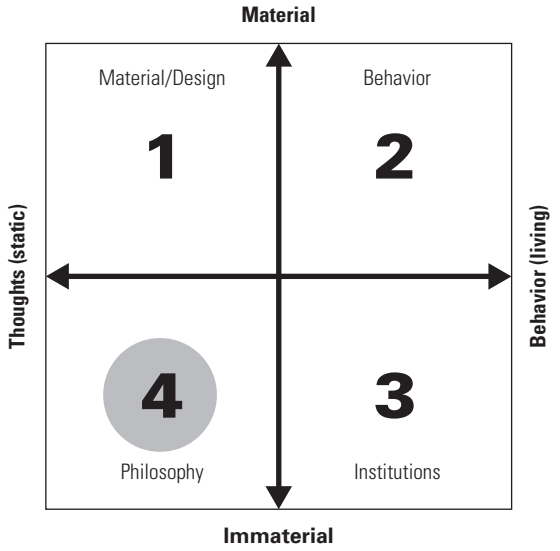


Figure 4
The "matrix" spatial structure of culture.

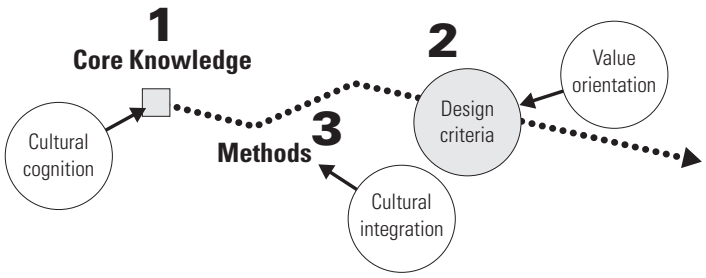


Figure 5
The analogy of "goal-attainment" in archery for the *Things East-West* design research.

3 Institutions, customs (behavior passed through forms of regulation or traditions), and
4 Philosophy or ideology, (structured thoughts, such as philosophical concepts, accumulated over time).

The *Things East West* design research was initiated to particularly investigate the quadrant of philosophy within the matrix.

**HC**: How did this matrix guide the research process?
**BL**: For research that was potentially so vast and complex, it was important to have a clear sense of direction. I drew the analogy with goal-attainment in archery.[18] This led to the identification of three key research components or anchors: *core knowledge*, which referred to the essential cultural cognition or point of orientation for the archer, *design criteria* that equated with the value orientation that the archer applied, and *(design) methods* that directed the firing of the arrow at the given target (Figure 5).

18 Talcott Parson, (1902)*Action Theory and the Huamn Condition*, (New York: The Free Press: c.1978).

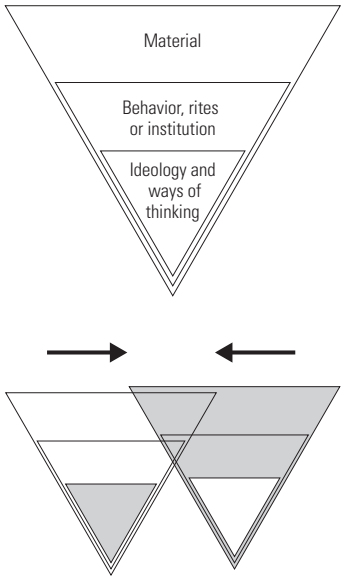


Figure 6
A model for the simple layering of the structures of cultures.

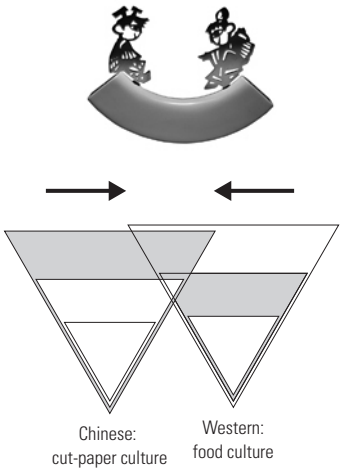


Figure 7
Acculturation in the case of the "Double-happiness" condiment set.

**HC**: You also mention "cultural integration" as part of the design method, what do you mean by "cultural integration"?
**BL**: Cultural integration concerns the hybridization of a particular culture with the contemporary Western or "global" culture that forms a kind of artificial acculturation of the particular and the universal. However, the key issue is the choice of cultural elements. Here I utilized the "cultural space" framework again, with its three levels (thinking, behavior or institution, and the material). (Figure 6)

Different levels of integration can be generated in the process of mutual acculturation. In the *Things East West* design experiment, the intention and motive of cultural integration was to revitalize and renovate the parent (Chinese) culture, to instill it with vitality, and to evolve a new model of product design practice by incorporating methodologies current in contemporary Western culture.

**HC:** This method of "cultural integration" is fascinating—have you applied it anywhere?
**BL:** Yes, the Double-happiness condiment set was one of my earlier experimental pieces that fused the outer (material) level of classical Chinese paper-cutting (applied to the figures) with the mid (behavior) level of Western food culture—the practice of making salt and pepper available at the table to flavor food. (Figure 7)

For *Things East West*, I evolved a series of experimental designs (Figure 8). Here the elements of Chinese culture are not made visually or materially explicit, but rather they are deeply embedded and underpin the design philosophy that generates the products (the inner level), as shown in the following three examples:

**Timed-Words (Figure 8a)**
"Timed-Words" is an electronic device designed to facilitate communication and to bond relationships among generations via electronically "time"' messages. Timed messages can be stored in custom-made jewels such as "solid-state memory" pieces to be given to friends or newborn babies, to be reopened at a designated date in the future to provide a bonding tool, especially with previous generations.

**Nature Radio (Figure 8b)**
"Nature Radio" electronically captures the wonderful sounds of nature and transforms them into corresponding tunes inside the home. Natural melodies can be infused and shared publicly as a means of heightening the sense of awareness of, and concern for, the natural world.

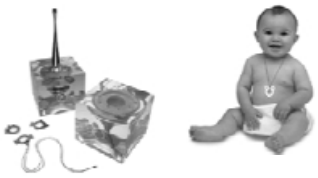

Figure 8a
Timed-Words. Photo: Benny Ding Leong

Figure 8b
Nature Radio. Photo: Benny Ding Leong

Figure 8c
Story-Telling Device. Photo: Benny Ding Leong

**Story-Telling Device (Figure 8c)**
"Story Telling Device" is a digital game that is specially designed to inspire children's imaginations. It encourages children to record interesting stories from their daily lives as an alternative to taking photographs. Later, they can share and discuss their feelings and perceptions about the world with their parents and others.

**HC**: How would you sum up this work?
**BL**: These designs deal with issues that originate in everyday life. They particularly are intended to address the lack of communication within families (which is surprisingly common in Hong Kong), heighten awareness of and concern for nature (far from an everyday experience in the city), and to encourage the careful utilization of and respect for objects (that is lacking in a consumer culture). These are human-oriented designs intended to develop new value orientations by harnessing traditional and contemporary culture based knowledge through the vehicle of science and technology. They are predicated on a deeper knowledge of Chinese cultural values than has been evident in many recent "Chinese style" objects. The forms of Timed-words, Nature Radio, and Story-Telling Device were designed to combine symbolic, semantic, and functional language. Forms were used as a medium in the pursuit and dissemination of a value system (which is culturally based). Its aim is to counterbalance the prevailing modern design consciousness that stresses transitory and superficial commodities.

**HC**: What are your future plans for this research?
**BL**: I have spent five years on the inception of the ideas, practical design experimentation, and the construction of the theoretical prototype. The findings are still at an elementary stage and they are awaiting further evaluation and verification. Nevertheless, the work to date has convinced me of the potential of cultural research and cognition for the development of new design theories and models. The problems that have arisen have provided the challenge for me to continue.
I am now working on two further developments: *Things East West—II* and *Beyond Things East West*. They are devoted to the resurrection of Chinese aesthetics, and the synthesis of alternative design methodologies and interactive theories for product design practice. I sincerely believe that cultural-based knowledge can provide new ways of thinking and designing which may be able to save us from contemporary ethical dilemmas. Human beings exist within culture and nature, as well as in the man-made environment. Through cultural transference, over time we may be able to redress imbalances which have served to divide humans from one another and from the natural world.

# Hong Kong as "Laboratory of the Future"

Ezio Manzini

*"We have the economy of compactness and density so we can do a lot of things in Hong Kong very quickly."* [1]

Ideas may move around the world, arrive everywhere and, eventually, have an influence on very distant places. This phenomenon, it has been said, is the essence of the ongoing processes of globalization.[2] At the same time, ideas (and with this term includes any kind of immaterial entities: from specific images to general visions, from fashionable looks to criteria of quality, and from new ways of life to innovative forms of organization) have to be produced somewhere. There has to have been some place in which, for a complex and peculiar mixture of factors, something sufficiently strong happened creating the "energy" for them to appear and, more important, to spread and become potentially influential on other groups of people elsewhere.[3] If and when this phenomenon happens, we can say that these places are playing the role of "laboratories of the future:" places in which the future is, at least to some extent, anticipated.

My hypothesis is that Hong Kong has all of the prerogatives to be one of these places: the highest density, the most service-oriented economy and service-intensive society, and the longest and deepest integration of Western technologies into Chinese culture. The social, economic, and cultural environment of Hong Kong appears to be an "extreme environment:" a very favorable habitat for new "forms of life," i.e., for new forms of social, cultural, and economic organization.[4]

Anyone who has lived in Hong Kong for awhile has had the opportunity to observe many particular aspects of the city (from city planning to domestic life, and from ways of working to ways of eating). Many such people may object to my hypothesis, saying that it is because the physical, social, and cultural environment in Hong Kong is so "extreme" that anything it may produce should be considered as place-specific, i.e., "something that can only work in Hong Kong."

In the past, this observation perhaps was correct and the assumption that it would never be possible to reproduce the Hong Kong experience elsewhere was true. As a matter of fact, it would not be easy to find other places in the world where the frantic life and work style of Hong Kong would be acceptable. But now things

1 Anthony Wong Sik-kei, "ITC Telecom Asia 2000," *South China Morning Post,* Special report, December 12, 2000.

2 I refer here, in particular, to the ideas of Arjun Appadurai. See Arjun Appadurai, "Disjunction and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy" in *The Phantom Public Sphere,* (Minneapolis: Bruce Robbins, 1993).

3 I also have developed these ideas in another paper: Ezio Manzini and Silvia Vugliano, *"Il locale del globale" (The local of the global)*, Pluriverso, N 1, (January, 2000).

4 In this context, the expression "extreme environment" refers to an environment in which some general characteristics and/or tendencies are pushed to the extreme (i.e., they are more evident than is the norm in other places). In the case of Hong Kong, as has been stated elsewhere, these characteristics are: density, service-orientation, cultural interaction, but also speed and acceleration in urban changes and in ways of living. For more on the Hong Kong environment and its "'extreme" character see the special issue on Hong Kong in *Domus,* 839 (July/August 2001), and Laurent Gutierrez, Ezio Manzini, and Valerie Portefaix, eds., HK *Lab* (Hong Kong: Map Book Publishers, 2002).

have changed and at least two main reasons make this assumption far less true than in the past.[5]

The first reason is that density, service intensity, and even the Chinese and Western cultural mixture are no longer unique to Hong Kong. High-density living is, and will be in the future, one of the most diffuse ways of organizing urban space in a hyperpopulated world. Service-intensity is, and will continue to be, the common denominator of every big city. Finally, the Chinese-Western mix will surely be one of the most characterizing aspects of the ongoing, turbulent development of China (and, in my view, not only of China). The second reason to think that Hong Kong will be a real "laboratory of the future" is that, unlike in the past, today it has stronger connections with the Chinese continent on the one hand, and with the entire world on the other. Hong Kong is now simultaneously a global city and a Chinese city.[6] Among the many implications of this new condition of existence, one is particularly interesting to us here: its economic and social experiments are no longer doomed to confinement within the place that generated them, but can easily migrate and influence other parts of the planet.

For these reasons, the great energy that the "extreme" environment that Hong Kong generates may produce specific, powerful ideas, and these ideas may have the power to migrate and play a role in the development path of other places, wherever the conditions may be favorable. Thus, the way Hong Kong manages to be at once global and Chinese will set a precedent, the effects of which will be felt not only in the future of the place itself but also in other cities in China, and elsewhere.

In saying that Hong Kong will be a laboratory of the future, I am not thinking of an exportable model, or of services and knowledge that would be available for sale everywhere in a standardized way. What, in my hypothesis, may migrate is a set of ideas and images which may influence, but not determine, the life style and forms of organization in other places. The *"Made as-in HK"* concept therefore could be exported and should be imagined as packages of ideas and system organization and knowledge: Hong Kong-specific experiences that, to be useful or useable in other places, should be adapted to the specific circumstances, i.e., specifically localized.

**A Service-based Economy (With a Product-oriented Culture)**

> Most accounts... put the stress on the fluidity, flexibility, and decentralized nature of the new form of capital. The Hong Kong economy has benefited very much from these developments that have allowed it to change from a trading post in the nineteenth century to its present position as a premier financial centre of Southeast Asia, from a colonial city to a global city...[7]

5 The general background of these considerations is drawn from many sources. Those that have been most influential on this paper are: Suskia Sassen, *Cities in a World Economy* (Thousands Oaks, CA: Pine Forge/Sage Press, 2000); Manuel Castells, *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996); Jeremy Rifkin, *The Age of Access* (New York: Putnam, 2000); IPTS, Futures Project, Information and Communication Technology and the Information Society Panel Report, Seville, N° Series 03, IPTS, (1999).

6 I have developed this concept in "An island no more," *Domus*, 839, (July/August 2001).

7 Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong. Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1997), 3.

Historically, Hong Kong's economic success was predicated on a combination of the influence of British colonial government, Chinese enterprises, and low cost labor: a mixture which, especially after World War II, led to the "Made in HK" model. The West became familiar with products that were turned out in large quantities at low prices, in a city where living and working conditions were unique. The local environment, with its dense population and heavily concentrated centers of manufacturing, reflected a type of production and living inconceivable anywhere else.

This state continued until 1978 and the institution of the Special Economic Zone just across the border in Shenzhen. From that year on, Hong Kong witnessed a different turn of events. The city, which always had been, in effect, an island, suddenly found itself able to expand, first towards Shenzhen, and later into the whole Pearl River delta. As a result, manufacturing operations were dismantled and reorganized beyond its borders, creating the world's largest "dispersed" factory, employing at least five million workers for concerns based in Hong Kong. This is the new Hong Kong economic and manufacturing model. It is a model in which more than the eighty percent of the GNP is created by services, which was expressed in a study done by a group of MIT researchers:[8] Made by Hong Kong (as opposed to the "Made *in* Hong Kong" epithet of earlier days).

Today, this economic and organizational model is still evolving, and it is even affecting the service industries themselves.[9] Beginning with those closest to production (from logistics to the more technical areas of product development), the more labor-intensive activities have moved out to Shenzhen, or even deeper into the mainland region. In the city only those services with the highest added value have remained: some have become involved in managing different services and others have stayed due to the closer connectivity (physical as well as virtual), which only a place as densely populated as Hong Kong can guarantee.[10]

**The Art of Managing Complex Systems**

> At that time, the break in the chain of value was an entirely new concept. We call it "dispersed manufacturing." This way of doing things immediately spread to the other industries, transforming Hong Kong's economy....[11]
>
> HK has emerged as a control, support and co-ordinating centre for production operation in the region. (Chief Executive Commission on Innovation and Technology. First Report)

"Japanese quality at the expense of the Chinese People's Republic." This slogan by a particular enterprise in Hong Kong[12] might be effectively adopted as the slogan for all things "Made by Hong

8 Suzanne Berger and Richard K. Lester, *Made by Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1997).

9 At the end of the '90s, Hong Kong was the tenth largest world exporter of goods and the ninth in services. It was the eighth largest banking center, with 400 banks from forty different countries. See Jim Rohwer, *Remade in America. How Asia Will Change Because America Boomed* ( New York: Crown Business, 2001), 184

10 Ibid.

11 Li & Fung operates in the field of supply-chain management, and works on behalf of American and European customers with a network of thousands of businesses scattered over the world. See Dinna Louise C. Dayo, *Asian Business Wisdom. From Deals to Dot.coms* (Singapore: John Wiley & Sons, 2001), 119.

12 See Berger and Lester, *Made by Hong Kong*, 37

Kong." It highlights the fact that the success of this production pattern is based not only on the low cost of available labor, but also on a particular organizational capacity. But the slogan is not quite correct in that the best factories analyzed in the study have widely applied the Japanese principles of total quality and "just-in-time" manufacturing. Also, no Japanese model illustrates how to manage a network of manufacturing facilities involving five to six million workers, spread across a broad territory and involving negotiating with local authorities outside all predefined rules. In other words, to refer to Japanese efficiency may have been commercially useful (at a time when that efficiency was acclaimed), but it is no longer the case. For behind the attainment of a "Japanese" efficiency lies an organizational capacity which, in my opinion, is absolutely Chinese, or rather "Hong Kongese."

Chung Po-Yang, Co-founder and Chairman Emeritus of DHL Ltd., whose activities and biography are emblematic of what we have been saying here, describes himself as "A Taoist manager, following the Chinese philosophy of Taoism, which advocates minimal government," which, applied to DHL, means: decentralization and strategic thinking at all levels of management with an "Asian family attitude." [13]

Recognizing this specific quality, the "art of managing complex systems" is a fundamental step to be taken by anyone wishing to find the "originality" of the "Made by HK" model. As a matter of fact, this city has produced knowledge and technologies capable of the advanced organization and management of particularly complex processes and logistics. This knowledge, for me, is original and, in many ways, profoundly Chinese. It may be a model of how Chinese culture and Western technology may merge.[14]

**HK Original Products-Services**

> With the advent of the knowledge-based global economy, innovation, technology, productivity and quality of services have become the key drivers of sustainable economic growth.[15]

Even if the "Made by Hong Kong" model is still in operation, in Hong Kong today everybody implicated agrees that, in its present form, it needs to be superseded. If the success of the model has been based on the capacity to produce at lower costs in China as they say, then this should now be changed because its competitive edge—the low cost of Chinese labor-won't last forever. So in order to prepare itself for this lost advantage, Hong Kong's economy must find a different direction in which to develop. This new direction has been identified, using current technocratic jargon, as ODM (Original Design Manufacturing) and OBM (Original Brand Manufacturing); as opposed to the earlier and still extant model of OEM (Original Equipment Manufacturing) in which Hong Kong manufacturers

13 See Louise Dinna and C. Dayo, *Asian Business Wisdom: From Deals to Dot.coms*, 42-43.

14 I have developed these ideas also in another paper written with Tak Lee, "Made in Hong Kong?" *Domus* 839, (July/August 2001).

15 Tung Chee-Hwa, "Hong Kong Awards for Services," *South China Morning Post* (November 28, 2000).

worked for export from designs provided by clients. In other words, what has emerged in recent years of public debate is a new concept for Hong Kong manufacturers: the concept of design originality.[16]

Since the realization of the need to change the model arose, the subject of originality has echoed in the words of Hong Kong's politicians and businessmen.[17] In practice, though, what it means and how to implement it remains unresolved. This is, perhaps, because efforts are being made in the least productive direction, that of product originality, when other much more promising paths could be followed. These more promising paths focus on services more than products, and at their most positive are based on experiences emerging from the internal market, rather than on ideas imported from other places. Some examples will make these assumptions more clear.

The first example is an automatic cash deposit machine, produced by Siemens, but entirely developed by its local subsidiary in collaboration with the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank. This product (in reality, a product-service) was created to meet the specific needs of small shopkeepers in the city who traditionally stay open late at night, long after the banks close. While it was created for the particular needs of Hong Kong it is certainly not limited to it. The so-called "24 hour society" (i.e., the society in which the traditional division between day life and night life tends to disappear) will increasingly be the norm for all urban contemporary societies.

A second example of the same phenomenon is the development of sophisticated information systems for passenger transport companies, which allow them to optimize their operations and improve the standard of services they offer. Delivering goods and mass transit are both activities that have some special characteristics in Hong Kong, but—obviously—every part of the world wants to be able to handle them better. This kind of organizational knowledge, and the software packages in which it is "materialized," are innovative product-services that have been specifically conceived and developed in Hong Kong and that, in the emerging service and knowledge economy, have to be considered as an expression of the new definition of "Made in Hong Kong."

Another successful "original" Hong Kong product is the "Octopus," a rechargeable cash card that can be used quickly and easily, and you don't even have to take it out of your wallet to use it. It was developed for use on crowded buses and the subways to make the service faster and more efficient. Since its introduction, the technology has been expanded for the purchase of all kinds of other services and goods, and it easily can be adapted to other places in the world.

Finally, there is the typical Hong Kong model of residential development, that is high-rise apartment towers with a podium at the base which provides a compact platform, offering every kind of

16 Chief Executive's Commission on Innovation and Technology, September 1998.

17 Mention should be made, in particular, of the address given by Tung Chee Hwa, Chief Executive of the Hong Kong SAR: "From Adversity to Opportunity" (Address by the Chief Executive The Honorable Tung Chee Hwa at the Legislative Council meeting on October 7, 1998).

service for residents. The spread of this type of accommodation which depends on a system of services has created a conjunction of expertise and organizing capacity that is exportable and adaptable to other contexts. Even if this model of living, in small apartments provided with many common services, is not entirely new and references particularly Le Corbusier's "Unite d'Habitation," it has the potential to be applied more successfully than ever it was in the West, in this new and rapidly changing context. It is a context that draws upon Western and Eastern life style culture. Here, density becomes a diffuse option in the development of new urban space in which society and the economy are shifting towards a servicebase. In my view, Hong Kong expertise is developing a new and dynamic framework in conceiving, constructing and managing complex packages of building and services that provide an interesting, exportable "Hong Kong made product."

The previously mentioned MIT research[18] presented these original (and successful) Hong Kong "products," and noted that each of them—at the beginning—had been thought up for the internal market and had been tested there. So it was the specific environment that stimulated these new products-services that have since been successfully adapted to many other contexts of use.[19]

To avoid misunderstanding, I would like to underline that, in putting forward these examples of success stories, I am not saying that they work on every possible points level as "good practice." If we consider the social and environmental perspectives, each one of them comes in for some criticism.[20] Nevertheless, they are good examples of "original HK products" and "products" that, in reality, refer to the field of services and systems, rather than that of the material world. However, they should be seen as the results of local inventions rather than external forces.

**A Service-intensive Chinese Society**

Globalisation promoted "anytime, anywhere" as a value.
But attention is shifting back from space to place.[21]

I began this paper by presenting some aspects of the Hong Kong economy which are contextually relevant, given that we are dealing with, probably the most business-oriented city in the world. Now I will move on to a discussion of some characteristics of daily life, and suggest how they may provide '"exportable" exemplars of how to live in a dense urban space.

Hong Kong daily life is largely predicated on a complex network of services. This phenomenon, which increasingly characterizes life in all the big cities of the world,[22] is not new, but it has been pushed to its extreme. Hong Kong society has been operating according to highly service-intensive ways of living for years (that is the quantity of commercial services on which people rely on a

18 Lester Berger, *Made by Hong Kong*, 1997.

19 Ibid., 79.

20 Laurent Gutierrez and Valerie Portefaix, "Life at Hyper-Density," *Domus*, 839 (July/August 2001).

21 Cf. John Thackara, *In the Bubble: Designing for Lightness in a Complex World* (Publication scheduled for Fall 2002).

22 Manuel Castells, *The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996); Suskia Sassen, *Cities in a World Economy* (Thousands Oaks, CA: Pine Forge/Sage Press, 2000).

day-to-day basis). For instance, it is a commonly accepted in Hong Kong that using public transport is more convenient than driving a car, and patronizing restaurants and take out services is more convenient than preparing meals at home.

To give another, less evident example, let's see how a Hong Kong developer presented a recent urban development:

> Laguna Verde makes effective use of modern technology to make your life completely hassle-free. With our e-living service, residents have ready access to a wealth of knowledge, news and entertainment fed directly to their home thorough fibre optic. Our smart card system allows easy access to the entrance lobby car park and can also be used to pay your management fee. Clubhouse facilities and Lifestyle Plus services are also available through the online reservation system. (Laguna Verde, Cheung Propriety Development Limited)

Only is Hong Kong (or, at least, here more than in any other place) the sales blurb for a flat focused on the quantity and quality of the services delivered in the podium. Ironically, little or nothing is written about the flat itself, which will be small and utilitarian, a kind of necessary but banal box-to-sleep-in.[23]

The most obvious link between service-intensity and the Hong Kong life style is the lack of space and its consequences for the average flat square-footage. The compact dimensions of flats drives families and individuals to outsource household activities, such as eating and social interaction that elsewhere could and would take place at home.

But the keyword to understanding the very special role of services in Hong Kong is density. Density, especially when it gets to very high levels, is much more than the visible expression of the lack of space. It becomes the habitat for particular forms of social organization. For obvious economic and organizational reasons, services are entities that are especially adapted to dense environments. It is easier and more economical to deliver services in the middle of a very dense town than in a very dispersed settlement.[24] As a result, it does not appear so strange that such a hyper-dense city has produced such a highly service-intensive way of living.

**Hong Kong Local Specificity**

> More means that just housing are required to produce a truly compact city with a density comparable to that of New York or Hong Kong... the concept of mix is essential.[25]

Hong Kong services present a very original mixture of Western and Chinese characteristics, especially relevant to the ongoing process of cultural globalization. But in the former British colony, this cultural hybridization has a long history and, as

23 Gutierrez and Portefaix, "Life at Hyper-Density," 2001.

24 Walter Stahel, "From Products to Services, or Selling Performance Instead of Goods," *Proceedings of the Conference Ecodesign '99*, (Tokyo, 1999).

25 Harm Tilman, "When Dense When Lite?" in Winy Maas, Jacob van Rijs and Richard Koek, *Farmax: Excursion on Density* (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 1998), 126.

mentioned before, it has now reached a kind of maturity, spreading to every level of society and, from our perspective, shaping the system of services on which citizens base a large part of their existence. In other words, Hong Kong has produced, over time, some highly localized kinds of services, where the degree of influence is on the way in which services are conceived, delivered, and used. Obviously, to discuss specific Chinese and Western influences on a given service is very difficult and risky. Nevertheless, seen through Western cultural glasses, many Hong Kong services appear to be shaped differently from what we are accustomed to in other, more Western or Westernized, cities. The services systems reveal "non-Western" influence both on the side of the client (the service interface) and on the side of the provider (the service organization).

For the client, the non-Western character of the services appears not only in the all too obvious case of food-related services, but also in the highly efficient transportation system, whose effectiveness lies in an intelligent combination of centrally organized systems (such as the underground and the major bus and tramway lines) and locally adaptable ones (such as the incredible number of taxis and minibuses). But this is not all. If we look more carefully at the variety of the service networks, we can discover what may appear as a "non-Western imprinting" in other, more subtle, but no less meaningful, ways. For example, in the way that shopkeepers organize their premises and display their merchandise, or in the words and images that developers use to present the podium services of the buildings they are promoting.[26]

On the side of the providers, the non-Western character of the services emerges clearly in the social/familial networks that underpin the majority of services. This is true not only in the small, family-based restaurant or grocery shops on the corner, but also in the most organized and complex systems. Given that services, per se, are always forms of social networks, it is easy to recognize a relationship between the diffusion of services and the strong social networks that characterize Chinese society.

**Future Challenges: Connectivity and Environmental Pressure in a Dense Environment**

> Probably the hardest thing to foresee ... in Asia over the next few years—and not only in Asia, is just how the global will interact with the local to produce hybrids that never existed before.[27]

What has been described so far is the system of services that characterizes, and that has characterized, the Hong Kong way of life. In some ways, for the territory this original system of services represents the "traditional" and the "local."

26 Gutierrez and Portefaix, *Life at Hyper-Density*, 2001.

27 Rohwer, *Remade in America. How Asia Will Change Because America Boomed.*

In recent times, the ongoing processes of cultural and economic globalization have affected traditional Hong Kong features and "the new" has appeared through connectivity. This resulted from the diffusion of the new information and communication technologies[28] and sustainability, that is the result of increased environmental concern, which have impacted on the characteristic Hong Kong service-intensity and service-specificity. But the outcome still is completely open. How will the double impact of connectivity and sustainability change the way of life and the way of doing business? And, vice versa, if Hong Kong experiences should migrate elsewhere, what will be their global impact, especially in the desirable scenario of a worldwide transition towards sustainable forms of society?

These questions are so big, and the present context so open and turbulent, that it is clearly impossible to give any real answer to them. Nevertheless, some consideration can be given and some hypotheses developed on Hong Kong's potential role in any future transition.[29]

Let us begin by considering only one point. What might happen when an increasing connectivity impacts on a very dense social environment, such as Hong Kong, that also is deeply rooted in a strong non-Western background? And how will service-intensive ways of life and Hong Kong-specific services be renewed and reoriented by the increasing levels of connectivity?

To date, research on connectivity, and on its social and economic effects, has been directed mainly towards what happens, in real time, when we connect people that are geographically disconnected, and when all of them are Western or deeply Westernized. What might happen when a high degree of connectivity invests a very dense social system, and when, as in Hong Kong, this system already is, in many ways, well connected, and has been, until now, considered far less. But change is taking place as evidenced by the fact that more and more researchers are considering the potential role of connectivity in dense environments, and its capacity to support new forms of services and social organizations. In his latest book, John Thackara writes that:

> For network and microprocessor designers, confronted already, by a light-speed crisis, "closer" is better than "faster." A low of locality drives this kind of network design. Where nerads lead, we should follow. Density and proximity are success factors in cities too.[30]

Given these issues, it is easy to observe that Hong Kong is in an exceptional position as a test-field where solutions may be found. It could be, and in many ways it is already, the best experimental field for observing what happens, and what could happen, with the

28 "Connectivity" refers to the number and quality of "manageable interactions" between the elements of a given system. All systems are characterized by a certain degree of connectivity. In recent times, ICT have penetrated socio-technical systems. The implication of this is that the number of interactions that are potentially manageable (i.e., the connectivity characterizing these systems) would tend to increase.

29 The general background of this discussion has been developed in several papers: Ezio Manzini, "Sustainability and Scenario Building: Scenarios of Sustainable Wellbeing and Sustainable Solutions Development," *Proceedings of the Conference Ecodesign 2001* (Tokyo, 2001) and Ezio Manzini, Carlo Vezzoli, and Garrette Clark, "Product-Service Systems: Using an Existing Concept as a New Approach to Sustainability," *The Journal of Design Research*, 1 (Delft: Delft University Press, 2001).

30 John Thackara, *In the Bubble: Designing for Lightness in a Complex World.*

highest density and the highest connectivity within a mixed, non-Western and Western, culture. At the same time, given the increasing pressure of the environmental issue, a second point has to be introduced, that is how to reorient the system towards sustainability.

**Sustainability in a Dense Environment *and* in a Chinese Culture**

> Hong Kong could engineer, finance and implement sustainable urban systems for energy, transport, waste, water, food, building materials, and other essential needs. Our extreme urban density is a unique laboratory ideally suited to showcasing sustainable urban systems.[31]

If we put Hong Kong and its ways of life in the perspective of sustainability, what appears is a radically contradictory image of a place on the one hand dramatically unsustainable yet, at the same time, in a more favorable position comparatively than many other big cities. Leaving the negative side of this image to other discussions (given also that everybody perceives these problems in his/her own direct experience of the city [32]) let us concentrate on the positive side, that is the opportunities.

The opportunities in a transition towards sustainability are represented in the merging of high-density, high-connectivity, and service-intensity. Within this framework, there exists the possibility of developing a new family of services based on an environmentally friendly Chinese-Western cultural paradigm.

The starting point is the recognition that density is not necessarily synonymous with unsustainability. Despite existing "ecological pictures," it is technically, environmentally, and economically easier to imagine sustainable solutions in the case of a dense social system than the case of a diffuse one.[33] Even the local branch of Friends of the Earth assumes that:

> Hong Kong's urban density is the only clearly sustainable part of its Footprint. This is a competitive advantage for Hong Kong's future because Western-style, car-based development is not sustainable for the planet." [34]

If this assumption is correct, the Hong Kong starting point in the transition towards sustainability presents some interesting opportunities. The big challenge now is to be able to orient the "new" to emerge from the social impact of the new technologies moving in the "right direction," that is in the direction of a new generation of sustainable service-based solutions. Given that this possible reorientation demands greater environmental and social sensitivity on the part of all of the different social actors, it will depend, in the territory, on how the whole society evolves and, more specifically, on how the deep roots of Chinese culture can be integrated with the most advanced global knowledge. Ideally, this

31 Friends of the Earth—Hong Kong, *Sustainability... a Community Dialogue,* Research Report, supported by Environment and Conservation Fund, Project 34/96 (Hong Kong, 2000).

32 With regard to the Hong Kong "ecological footprint," see the very interesting and complete study that has been done and edited by Friends of the Earth: Friends of the Earth Hong Kong, *Sustainability... a Community Dialogue.*

33 Winy Maas, Jacob van Rijs, and Richard Koek, *Farma: Excursion on Density* (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 1998), 34–52; Walter Stahel, "From Products to Services, or Selling Performance Instead of Goods," *Proceedings of the Conference Ecodesign '99* (Tokyo, 1999).

34 Cf. Friends of the Earth—Hong Kong, *Sustainability... a Community Dialogue,* 20.

will lead to new ideas of well-being and, hopefully, to more sustainable ways of living.[35]

In some sense, Chinese traditional ideas about production have provided a very significant list of ideas for current society. From my point of view, the most important in this list can be summed up as a "method of carefulness," "knowing common sense," "doing nothing," plus another very important idea about environmental protection: "benefit everything in the world." [36]

(This list of "good ideas," proposed by Professor Xu Ping of the Nanjing Academy of Art, synthesizes very well what many Chinese students think about the possible Chinese interpretation of the Western concept of sustainability; or better, of what they perceive as the Western cultural background of sustainability.)

Its is a completely open question as to whether traditional Chinese wisdom will really affect the country's way of facing environmental and social problems that are related to the ongoing rapid economic development. But if there will be a place in which new experiments in this direction can occur, the place will be Hong Kong. Even if its business and consumption-oriented way of living appear in opposition to the list of the "good Chinese ideas," Hong Kong has the potentiality to be a test-field for the most advanced experiments. When and how these experiments will take place, what their results will be, and what influence they will have on other Chinese and non-Chinese regions are crucial questions that cannot be answered here.

**Conclusions**

1 The new definition of "Made in Hong" should not be sought within the old economy of products, but in the new economy of services and knowledge. Within this framework, the "art of managing complex systems" has to be seen as an original expression of the hybridization of Western and Chinese culture, and has to be considered as the basis for original "Hong Kong products."

2 In recent decades, Hong Kong has begun to emerge as a proto-"laboratory of the future," where its specific ways of life have engendered new typologies of services, relationships between public and private spaces, forms of household organization, and hybrid Chinese-Western behavior. Each may be seen as evidence of the "art of managing complex systems" applied to daily life that characterizes Hong Kong's success in the dispersed manufacturing system of the Pearl River delta.

3 The Hong Kong-specific ways of living and their related services may be considered as possible role models for elsewhere in the world. What today is specific to the territory, tomorrow could be commonplace where high density and high connectivity meet, and where Chinese and Western cultures mix (and other cultures mix, too).

35 Mention should be made of *Hong Kong—Mainland China Network on Design for Sustainability,* an ongoing research project funded by the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. The research started in 2001 and it is being developed as a joint-program with CIRIS-Politecnico di Milano, Italy, and with the Hunan University in Changsha, China. Some initial results of the research were presented in Ezio Manzini, and Benny Leong, "Strategic Design and design for Sustainability. A General Overview and Some Consideration in the Chinese Context," *Proceedings of the Tsinghua 2001 China International Design Forum, Beijing, 2001* (China International Design Forum, Beijing 2001).

36 Xu Ping, *Dialogue Through Time and Space* (Paper presented at the Conference of the Hunan University on Sustainability and Design, Changsha, (Feb. 22, 2001).

4 The immediate role of Hong Kong as a laboratory of the future might focus on two major and interconnected issues: the impact of higher levels of connectivity and the search for sustainable solutions in highly dense and culturally hybrid environments.

As yet, the result of these experiments remains open, but the potential is rich.

# The "Futurings" of Hong Kong

Tony Fry

Trepidation comes in two guises when venturing into the space and time of an Other. First is that one never arrives at where one thinks oneself to be (among the few, Edward Said made this clear some time ago in *Orientalism* when he exposed the discovery of the East as an invention and export of the West); second, that one might unwittingly offend the very people to whom one wishes to show respect.

For me, Hong Kong was a port of entry into China as a history, thinking, and culture. As such, no matter what one learns, there is an overwhelming sense of just how little one knows, just how much there is to know, how much has been forgotten, AND how little those things that are of great value are valued. Against this setting, Hong Kong epitomizes a geography and history of ambiguity, richness and terror, limitation and potentiality. These figures are not binaries but unified opposites (a relation understandable through the Chinese concept of *Yin-yang*[1]). Ambitiously, I want to evoke Hong Kong's potentiality as both the local and the global. In so doing, I want to position readers outside Hong Kong as actively engaged with this communication of "glocal thinking." To that small, but very significant, design community in Hong Kong, "glocal thinking" hopefully will provide a new perspective on familiar issues of practical value. To do this is, to use an Australian term, a "big ask" for all concerned. However, there are lessons for all of us in this communication. This is because we still are lodged in an inadequate kind of thinking that makes clear dis-tinctions between "the local" and "the global," while we need to think "glocally" (in spite of this inelegant term sticking in our craw).[2]

This then is a glocal communication about Hong Kong and about design thought otherwise—which will be seen at the end of the essay when ancient Chinese structurally inscribed modes of design will be shown to have much to teach the future of "designing otherwise."

Although now touted as a material expression of one system of China's "one nation, two systems" philosophy, the new ideology has not displaced old Hong Kong images and habits. The place of course is one of the most image-saturated cities in the world. The fact that it now is a "Special Administrative Region" makes little difference to such cultural perceptions. Like London, New York, or Sydney, Hong Kong has been made instantly recognizable to itself and elsewhere because it has televisual presence. Its image is constituted by an amalgam of stereotypical figures: the Star Ferry crossing

1 The complexity of *Yin-yang* is discussed at length and in various ways in David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius* (New York: Suny, 1987).

2 As is often the case, theory trails events. "Glocal" products have been around for a long time, and long before "globalization" hit the airwaves. Certainly, from the 1920s, the way in which General Motors not only retained the local badging of car companies they bought up around the world, but also retained and played the local nationalist rhetoric associated with the badge is one example of this. This history is evident in the Australian example of the Holden Motor Company. Staying with the car industry, more sophisticated late-modern examples of this currently are evident in China, where increasingly locally coded product is "glocalised" by a design strategy that uses global automotive companies, design teams, components to create cars with which to build a massive local car market and to cater for local desires, perceptions, budgets, and conditions—the Lucky Star car is one example of this. The project was marketed (so promotional materials tell us) to synthesize a whole range of plural and sometimes contradictory messages to demonstrate: advanced global car technology and components; the best of Chinese wisdom, and the needs of the people; inspiration from nature; high style; comfort; a wide range of different models; economy and reliability; and "greenness." The design team for the car included Porsche engineering, Fiat, Renault, and Mitsubishi; and it has been produced by the Shenzhen Tint Dragonfly Industrial Company with "mature foreign components such as the engine and the chassis."

the harbor, garish toys, the opulence of the Peninsula Hotel, illuminated neon signs strung across the tourist-filled streets of Tsim Sha Tsui, The Peak, movies, and more. Overlaying and animating these stereotypical figures are numerous historically inscribed perceptions of one of the most densely populated pieces of real estate on the planet. This reality manifests itself in tightly knit communities, conveyor belt shopping culture, noisy restaurants, rampant capitalism, and a hyper-real sameness of difference. This contradiction is engendered by a now constant cycle of destruction and renewal of, for example, clothes, furniture, window displays, and buildings. In fact nothing escapes the ever-faster turning of this cycle of unsustainability.

The sound, the image of this city, where everything and nothing is designed, attracts and repels, captivates and captures. Underpinning the image, trade, tourism, and culture of Hong Kong has been another facticity of stereotyping, which is as a meeting place between East, West, modernity and its Others. Yet for all the complexity, televisuality, and material substance of Hong Kong, one still can see it as an unrealized project—a project in flux. This is because, in one direction, Hong Kong suffers from its authentic inauthenticity (coming from the nonexistence of any precolonial identity); and in the other from what historians of traditional Chinese garden design call "borrowing views" (which now would be designated as a "mimetic economy"), and then from an underdeveloped vision of what might be "otherwise." Rather than these very general remarks being marginal to a concern with design in Hong Kong they are, in their social, cultural, political, and economic particularities, at its core. This is because, historically, architectural, industrial, graphic, fashion, furniture, and other design practices in the territory all exist in an identifiable condition of auto-negation—the place has never been able to be simply local. The authentic inauthenticity of Hong Kong, its unsituated situatedness, actually is more than just a part of the global fascination with the place—it is its design opportunity. The ephemera and expendability, stylistic appropriation, the packaging (of) existing manufacturer (OEM) products in a local skin, and the Westernization of Eastern fashion—these are just some of the more widely acknowledged features of the Hong Kong attainment and negation. From such a history there are things to discard and things to nurture (learning "the what" and "the how" of this is one of the key learnings).

The vectors now directing the place are multiple in number and orientation. There is the rise of the competitor city, Shanghai, the shadow of the fate of Taiwan, the variably expressed political tension of living in the space of the political nexus between China's two systems as well as the more recent economic diminishment. Then there are current and somewhat incoherent attempts to reconfigure Hong Kong via the development of hyper-real projects to

Footnote 2 *continued*

At the time of this writing, the Lucky Star project has been completed to the design and prototype stage (approximately one hundred units are already on the road in Xian city as taxicabs). Although the Chinese Government has approved the project, it has not as yet moved into mass production.

make the place (by displacement) a center of tourism for the burgeoning capital classes of China, as well as for Asia in general.

Against this backdrop, there is the birth of a small design community who is starting to realize, by degree, that there could be another way or ways.[3] One possibility is of Hong Kong becoming a regional center for an emergent design community—one that goes beyond its past situatedness as a locus of exchange of objects, agencies, images, and people to become a glocal community of (ex)-change.

**Thinking Design Potential in Context**

Design thinking is not natural. It is learned in that unnaturalness we call culture. To introduce another kind of design thinking requires the denaturalization of the particular ways that "design" has become naturalized within "it" culture. To be between cultures is to be between "designings." So situated, between an old and new design thinking, the designer faces a question: "Which way to turn?" These remarks bring us to considering the distinction between a modern Western metaphysical/intuitive relation to design(ing) and the trace of ancient Chinese ontological design(ing) and its significance to the present in general, and to Hong Kong in particular.

Design's implication in the rise of China as a major global economy has been significant, yet it has been under-recognized, theorized, and documented both inside, and especially, outside China. The most recent evident manifestations of its role have been the hiring of architectural and industrial design expertise from around the world, the technocratic character of the development of architectural and design education within China, and the country's new found enthusiasm for links with design institutions outside China. Such developments demonstrate that design is not ideologically neutral. This non-neutrality can be registered (as a gradual rollout) politically, culturally and environmentally.

The primary *political* objective of China's regimes of rule always has remained the same—holding the enormous country with its great cultural diversity together. Fear of the disruptive force of difference is a political mindset that links the ancients to the moderns. Within China's "one nation two systems," distinctions can be drawn between the accommodation of Chinese "communism," repressed proto-democracy, Chinese "capitalism," and the power of an emergent commodity sphere. Not so long ago capitalism appeared, and was presented as, that difference that threatened the very being of the nation. Now difference has been made the same—the free market and commodity culture are viewed as supplementary agents of unification—one nation, one political ideology, one market, one consumerist desire, and one modern lifeworld as a mark of progress, and all via the guiding hand of the state. In contrast to capitalism, any idea able to de-unify the nation poses a danger to the state. In this setting, "democracy" evokes the specter

3 This very issue of the design journal *Design Issues* evidences this "fact."

of difference, as well as a challenge to the continuity of the exiting culture of power.

Against this backdrop, Hong Kong design culture has a potential as a very significant "import substitute" in terms of skills, services and education. However, realizing this potentiality is not just an economic question—it also is a politically strategic one. In all but exceptional circumstances, design is a quiet politics.

The question now becomes: How does the architect/designer think in this political context in relation to the fact that all design is ideological (there is nothing designed which does not carry an ideological value)? This question is all the more important because of (i) the displacement of "the political" (i.e., in relation to Hong Kong's fading position as an outpost of democracy and the lost impetus of the "democracy movement"' in mainland China, and the ongoing containment of "local outrage"); and, (ii) by the emergence of a culture of the "post-political" that trades political and civil freedoms for the freedom to consume. That this "freedom" rests on a fundamental unfreedom, the unsustainable, has not reached the elite. let alone popular consciousness. Contrary to a long tradition of concern with population, resources, and scarcity, what is now becoming very evident is that what threatens is the impact of excess. Although the world's population has increased from 1.3 billion to 6.0 billion people in a century, the really big leap has been the increase in the per capita impact of people which, in an industrialized country, can be move than forty times what it was in 1900. This means that population figures could fall, but impacts would continue to rise. This issue has a great deal of salience for China and the rest of the "industrializing world." As we shall see, it raises profound design, social equity, economic, ethical, and political issues.

Read from a Eurocentric perspective, design occupied a central position in the very formation and development of *Chinese culture*, the nation's political structures and economy. It is necessary to qualify this as Eurocentric for although design appears as a category that is universally transcultural, it is very questionably so. Our viewing "design" in ancient culture cannot be divided from the intent to establish the hegemony of a universal design culture (that is the rule of one understanding of design). This aim was, and is, structural to economic and cultural modernity ("globalization"), and it is still being pursued. Consequently, an induction into the globalized design point of view is a "back-loading" of a modern category of thought onto an ancient world. The fact that this world functioned within a very different lifeworld and conceptual schema thus is erased. This erasure of the original thinking is doubled when translating out of Chinese, producing an actual substitution of an ancient term with a modern one. However, a reverse process can be enacted. As will be briefly shown when commenting on the work of Lothar Ledderose, knowledge from the distant past sometimes can

be re-realized through its ability to contribute "practical wisdom" to a thinking and making out of which viable futures can be helped to emerge.

A critical distinction must be made between a metaphysical and ontological understanding of design. One cannot presume that another culture, at another place and time, named, theorized, and articulated what retrospectively gets designated as a design practice, as design/designing. Design does not necessarily have a status historically in an ancient culture that corresponds with a contemporary classification and expression of what it is. Conversely, from a contemporary understanding, the historicity of design can be seen to be ontologically present. This means that, retrospectively, a performative reading of design can be made, in contrast to making any identification of a design discourse (which is that which linguistically and practically articulates design as concept and labor).

The metaphysical and ontological distinction of design is, in fact, perpetually present. While one can say that all human beings design (because it is in fact part of the ontic *"existell"*of being human), and while it is the case that only some humans bring design/designing into presence as a praxis and acquire an ontology as designer, this is not design/designing in common. What we really need to recognize is while the "human" has been constructed as a universal condition, this is (a) an extremely recent, if now hegemonic, proposition, and (b) the essence of "being human" is nothing without "its" culture (implying a plural, rather than singular condition). We have little sense of the extensive plurality of humanness (while having been inducted into respecting cultural difference). This lack is testament to the power of political and cultural modernity. Ironically, those humanist agencies that promote and defend human rights are the inheritors of this trajectory—a trajectory that implicates them in the destruction (of form and recognition) of a fundamental difference of a being that is completely other.

The logic of what has been argued means that if there are fundamental cultural differences between modes of being-in-the-world, then the nature of the world itself is different, which in turn means fundamental ontological differences. These differences take material forms that are prefigured by projections of elements of the world to be made. If we bring this kind of thinking to Chinese culture, what we discover is a very different ground upon which "design" was constituted, which was through the inscriptive power of modularity as it was embedded in, and extended by, a system of writing.

In his remarkable book, Ledderose has made clear the way systemic modularity, stemming from the language, underpins many seemingly very different practices and products of Chinese culture.[4] But more than this, what systemic modularity reveals is a designing that breaks down the binary distinction between economic and cultural production inherent in Western productivism, as well as the

4 There is a direct link between elements created by brush strokes, the building of a modular element within a single character, stringing the characters into a series to make a text, and the mass of 50,000 characters of the written language. A school child uses around 2,000 symbols, an educated person 3,000 to 4,000, and a scholar around 10,000. On the Chinese language, see Lothar Ledderose, *Ten Thousand Things* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000).

centrality of the creative subject. Moreover, approached from language systems, the contrast between the foundations of the West and Chinese script-based East become very clear. The West has languages that center on the representational capability of an alphabet which, while it can be learned quickly, delivers rich but unstable language use. Western languages exist in a condition of constant change and depend upon considerable interpretative skills. So great is the change that trying to read the language as used say 1,000 years ago is like dealing with a foreign tongue (the examples of old English and German come to mind). This is not so with a symbol-based script. While it takes a good deal of time and effort to learn, it remains constant—an educated Chinese person can read a text written several thousand years ago. Chinese functions as an almost inexhaustible source of building a mass of complexity and difference —the modular construction of the language has designed a thinking enacted through modularity in diverse areas. Writing, ceramic production, bronze casting, printing, "factory art," the building of wooden structures, bureaucratic systems, the law, labor process, and many other things have emerged out of the same system of rules of organization and assembly that is found within the essence of modularity of Chinese script.

Viewing this material culture in the context of histories of institutions of civil society, practical sciences, industrial archaeology, architecture, and the arts, it is quite evident that not only was China in advance of European nations for thousands of years, but the whole history of Western industrial development is based on a very questionable narrative of progress. The life-work of Joseph Needham, based on the archaeology of a lost culture, was dedicated to making this clear.[5] The more one looks at Asian and Middle Eastern history, the more the Western account looks like the selective editing of Eurocentric fabrication. It is not only clear from Needham's work, for example, that mechanical, civil, mining, metallurgical, and agricultural engineering were all well advanced in China long before the West had even started to explore these areas, but also on a considerable scale. Mass production, a factory system, and work forces of thousands were all elemental to Chinese economic activity well over twenty-five hundred years ago.[6] This continued until at least the sixteenth century, when it was not unusual for factories making paper, textiles and ceramics to have workforces of a 1,000 people or more.

Many remarkable documents have been discovered in the not very distant past. One example is a text unearthed in the mid-twentieth century, the *Thien Kung Khai Wu (The Exploitation of the Works of Nature)* of 1637, which addressed agriculture and industry, and has been described as "China's greatest technological classic." This material is itself linked to a whole series of important primary texts such as the *Khao Kung Chi* (Artificers Record) which, in turn, contained a chapter of the *Chou Li* (Record of the Institutions of the

5 Joseph Needham's life-work, his massive, many volumed *Science and Civilisation in China*, published by Cambridge University Press over many decades, was characterized as an "archaeology of a disappeared culture." While sometimes criticized for its critical analysis, the project represents an extraordinary archive of objects, practices, and knowledge. It has to be one of the most under-recognized empirico-historical enterprises of the twentieth century.

6 Joseph Needham, *The Development of Iron and Steel Technology in China: Second Biennial Dickinson Memorial Lecture* (London: Newcomen Society, 1956). Needham cites, for example, the famed Ironmaster *Cho Shi*, who founded an ironworks in Szechuan in the third century, which had a highly organized system of production and employed nearly two thousand men.

Chou Dynasty). The original of this latter document was lost at the beginning of the Han Dynasty, and a substitute document was collected by Prince Hsien of Ho-Chien in the second quarter of the second century.[7]

These "design, technical and standards" manuals while providing a great deal of information assumed a logic of modularity. This left the fundamental ontological embeddedness of designing intact—both the texts and their users functioned with a sense of creativity based on small incremental transformations over a vast expanse of time. While this excluded notions of originality (and was not prejudicial toward reproduction), it embraced slow and constant change that over time could be considerable. Thus, the appearance of mimeses was always illusory. At the same time creativity was acknowledged, but as posited in "nature"' and outside of the human.[8]

One of the most important examples of these manuals was the *Yingzao Fashi*. This famous and influential manual was written in 1091, with a second edition in 1103 (no evidence of the first edition still exists). It was created as a design and technical manual of standards for the Master of Works, which was a section in the Ministry of Works—the government department responsible for the construction of palaces, temples, barracks, government buildings, moats, gardens, bridges, and boats.[9] The second edition text addressed the ordering of materials, building design, and construction details for all building types including the detailing of stonework, carpentry and joinery, wood carving, roofing, plastering, and finishes. One of the key features of the manual was its use of a modular standard of measurement (a *fen*) that, in many ways, prefigured systems building.[10]

The manual was produced in response to dealing with the massive expansion of building development in the first one hundred years of the Sun Dynasty. What is remarkable about the design approach is the way the modular design methods allowed for a new building to employ components taken from the disassembly of an old building of a different scale and use.[11]

While having enormous status as a document in Chinese architectural history, the significance of the *Yingzao Fashi* to contemporary design practice, in and beyond architecture, has not yet been comprehended. In terms of contemporary needs, it is an instruction in design for the conservation of materials and waste elimination, on design for disassembly, on movable buildings, on interchangeable components and, above all, on the value of a design-based tradition of construction standards. In modern terms, what it provides is a challenge to the thinking of adaptive reuse.

At this juncture, one can contrast this ancient thinking with the new. There is, for instance, the current contradiction of attempting to load "environmental performance" onto individually expressive, aesthetically overcooked, and style delimited building with often a restricted design-life. That ancient peoples could, with

7 Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, Vol. 4, Physics and Physical Technology Part 2, Mechanical Engineering, Section 27, 18. Note that all dates specified are based upon a Western Judeo-Christian calendar– which itself makes a point of the non availability of a neutral point of reference.

8 Ledderose, *Ten Thousand Things*, 7.

9 These departments, while subject to occasional changes of name, endured over many hundreds of years.

10 For an account of this measurement, see Ledderose, *Ten Thousand Things,* 134.

11 Liang Sicheng, *Ying Zao ta Shi Zhu Shi*, Vol. 1:13 of a total of 34 sections (Beijing: Zhong guo Jianzhu, Gongye Chubabshe, 1983). This facsimile edition based on the first modern translation of 1925 was the product of many decades of research, and heralded the beginning of modern Chinese architectural history. The latest edition, with a new introduction, was produced in 1963. However, it was kept hidden during the course of the Cultural Revolution, and not published until the early 1980s.

considerable skill, construct buildings from simple materials and limited technology that stood for many hundreds of years, and in so doing provide a significant agent for the transfer of cultural traditions. Not withstanding the literature of archaeologists, anthropology, or the hype of tourism, there still is a failure to learn the lessons from the material past. Rather than securing a recognition of the importance of "creativity" in the face of the unsustainable, the dominant disposition of design culture displays its poverty and reduces the expression of the creative to mere appearance.

An enormous amount of *environmental* destruction occurs, by default, through a failure of design.

Design (as practice and product) has been both fellow traveler and active agent in the rise of the unsustainable. The unsustainability of the rate of "natural resource appropriation and environmental destruction," the creation of "consumer culture and its associated impacts," the "technologicalization of war," the "release of toxins into the environment," and the turning of "vast quantities of materials into waste" are but a few of the features of design-implicated destruction that I have named and examined elsewhere as the "defutured." [12]

The point being made here is basic: designers, be they linked to areas such as engineering, architecture, manufactured products, communication media, and the commodification of pleasure, have just not grasped how much they have been, and still are, implicated in the creation of the unsustainable. Obviously, few designers consciously set out to be destructive. However, they were, and still are, largely unaware of what is destroyed by the industrial culture's drive to create. For the main part, designers exist in a culture with a deeply embedded propensity toward productivism. As a result, this culture lives in, and is replicated by, their agency. To be a designer is to be inducted into this culture and to be designed by it. This culture has an extremely limited reflective capability, which itself limits its ethic of responsibility. In this situation, there is a fundamental imperative to transform/create another kind of design knowledge (as well as education, practice, and economics—but that's another story).

Historically, Hong Kong has been an iconic site for the defutured in Asia. It has been a major attractor for unsustainable modes of consumption and for the production of cheap, disposable, nonbiodegradable, and often-toxic goods. A strong desire for the locally made or imported unsustainable lives on—perceived as "the modern, the future, progress, and fashionable." Certainly Hong Kong has been one of the lenses through which mainland Chinese views a possible future.

12 Tony Fry, *A New Design Philosophy: An Introduction to Defuturing* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 1999).

**Questioning Futures**

We now need to bring the political, the cultural, and the environmental together and ask: Given how Hong Kong is now situated, what can "it" design? To answer this, four sub-questions will be posed and answered.

***To whose and which future does Hong Kong attach itself?***

There is no single determined future. The future is not a *tabla rasa* (although many futurists continue to treat it as such)—a great deal already is inscribed, thus there are major delimitations of what is and is not possible. So while one cannot gaze into a crystal ball and see what is coming, it is possible to gain an appreciation of the directive force of emergent material circumstances and associated imperatives. The most general and significant picture here is the already identified expansion of the impact of population, with all its attendant problems. Looked at from the geo-economic perspective of China, at least two very different futures can be contemplated. There is a continuity of the current trajectory of China's growth as a global economic power, with its productive output and level of internal consumption continuing to markedly rise. This model of "development" is largely based on a "catch up with modernity" mindset. In large part, it is about the past of the industrialized world still being thought of as a very significant part of China's future (in China). It also is about drawing more and more of its population into a higher level of impact. This future is both locally and globally unsustainable and, in the company of India, will take the defutured to new heights. We will briefly examine just one issue—global warming.

China's population of 1.32 billion is twenty-two percent of the world's population. According to the World Energy Council, the country is the world's largest coal producer and consumer and currently contributes 13.5 percent of global $CO_2$ emissions— making it, after the USA, the world's second largest emitter. On the basis of current trends of economic growth, and the fact that coal consumption has tripled in the last 20 years, China's share in global $CO_2$ emissions is expected to increase and is likely to exceed those of the U.S. by 2020.[13] In contrast, at present, with six percent of the world's population, the U.S. contributes twenty percent of global $CO_2$ emissions. But the real contrast comes when we look at life in China. According to an Asian Development Bank report, last year 230 million people in China (18.5 percent of the population) existed on less than one dollar per day, with 648 million people (fifty-four percent of the population) surviving on less than two dollars per day. In this context, the Chinese government says it is possible for people in rural China to have enough to eat and wear, and a place to live, on twenty-two cents per day. Additionally, as efficiency in the global economy drives internal economic policy, an enormous amount of "unproductive" labor is being shed, creating significant

13 Zhong Xiang Zhang, *Is China Taking Actions to Limit Its Greenhouse Gas Emissions? Past Evidence and Future Prospects* (www.weathervane.rff.org/refdocs/zhang_china.pdf). Note: China's gross domestic product grew at an average annual rate of about ten percent over the period 1978–1997. Currently, it is 7.5 percent.

levels of unemployed urban poor.[14] At the same time, retail sales are booming.[15] While a great deal could be said about this picture, the observation to make in the context of design futures is this: the ambition is to create a modern nation with a standard of living somewhere near a Western industrialized nation. In terms of the economic future of China, its destiny lies in how it manages the relation between the cheapness of its labor and the growth of a large domestic market. Thus, it has the expectation of constant expansion of domestic consumption for a protracted period. This is the scenario underpinning a long-term increase in GHG emissions. Now rather than these concerns being distant from Hong Kong and design considerations, they are central to its future.

As a political and economic power, or more specifically a global cheap labor manufacturer, as a proto-consumer society, and as both, China's global impact will go on growing. There is no moral argument to place in the path of this trajectory unless the question of equity and redistributive justice is broached globally. Three future China scenarios can be contemplated: (i) the most likely is a "business as usual" scenario via a continuation of action to increase the nation's standard of living and status, accompanied by ongoing and modest government and industry-led exercises in environmental responsibility which, nonetheless, still means China extends its ability to defuture; (ii) the very unlikely prospect of "enlightened correction" by "the free world" to substantially reduce its impacts to a level to allow for improvements in China, and industrializing poor nations; or, (iii) the leap-frog to a culture and economy predicated on sustainment (while this undoubtedly is a very tough option, it is the one able to deliver the greatest national and international benefits). However, the potential of this direction has to be dynamically conceptualized, materialized, and come from within. It requires science, engineering, design, industry, the arts, and government to have a much clearer view of problems, possibilities, and opportunities, and to have formed quite new structures of collaboration. Hong Kong is one of the few places in the world that has the expertise, the cultural capital, wealth, and entrepreneurial drive to be able to contemplate the absolutely essential and seemingly impossible—it could imagine itself into being a catalytic center of change. This could be the vision to fill the current void, and so transform the political landscape. However, as a culture, and as a locus of desire, on the outside of being inside China it has to find a new way to liberate itself from the only history it has known. This is exactly what "sustainment-capitalism" (constituted as new kinds of desires, dreams, relations, values, signs, services, and products) could dramatically be as a nonconfrontational, pragmatic, and affirmative progressivism—a viable future.

14 "China's Economy Set to Grow by 8 Percent in 2000," *China Daily* 11/21/00.

15 The Asian Development Bank Report indicated that retail sales grew by 9.9 percent in the first three quarters of 2000, compared with 6.8 percent in 1999.

***How can Hong Kong figure in the conflict between sustainability and the unsustainable?***

This question has been answered in part. Realistically, it would be utopian to believe that what has been suggested can be achieved by the power of reason, enlightened self-interest, or flashes of insight. If a beginning were to be made, what actually would be needed would be a first step. This step is to position Hong Kong as a "sustainment leader" on a path to well-being coming from environmental security (which is also the path to freedom).[16] The design community, building on an already existing cadre of educated and inspired thinkers, is uniquely placed to take on this role by design. What this actually means is initially coming together to structure a glocal (the locals plus Hong Kong diaspora) set of conversations, relations, events, messages, and images. While "the nature of things" has to be *seen* in very different ways, what arrives last is a retreat into conventional design practice and the design of "things." The dystopic defuturing negatives of existing utopias have to be met head on, and overwhelmed, by the excitement and gigantic creative challenge of realizing very hard but, in the end, realizable and practically grounded possibilities.

***What does Hong Kong design culture have to learn?***

Hong Kong does not have a future as what it was; it (the unification of its differences) has as yet to design what it might be.

Presumptively, and in common with design cultures everywhere, the view presented here is that an Other designing has to be learned. This would be a designing predicated on the mobilization of Hong Kong's cultural capital in the context of its "new" contexts (the dawning of the age of recognized unsustainability, a recognition of Hong Kong's contribution to the defutured, and the termination of a very limited access to a substantial manufacturing base—which was always cited as a major condition of limitation).

***Who speaks for Hong Kong?***

Clearly not this *gwai lo* so said, I know enough of its design culture to know there are voices who can and will.

**Conclusion**

Little has been said here to create a picture of the existing and pragmatic relation between design in Hong Kong and mainland China. This is because the bias has been futural rather than historical. Obviously, gaining a conjunctural understanding of the situation on the ground is important. However, unless there is a willingness to contemplate the new, as it stands on the ground of the past, the same can but constantly return. Being close to and far from Hong Kong, I venture to observe the place design could have in the realization of its potential to "give value." In a modern sense, "giving value to" can be written as: one cannot sustain what one values, as

16 We should note here that design-based environmental action is already on the agenda in Hong Kong. For example: *Hong Kong Environmental Building Assessment Method* (Hong Kong: Centre for Environmental Technology, 1999).

that worthy of value, without making an investment in "the world of value (the sustainable)" and becoming "human" in that world (which is the essence of *yi* [17]). Moreover, such action cannot be undertaken without gaining an ability to reflect upon the truth of one's self, among others, *performatively.* This is not just a matter of being "true to oneself" but understanding that one's "self" and one's world are a product of one's actions (this effectively indicates that ethics is what one does, rather than being a philosophical proposition and sub-discipline).

As said, Western culture has imposed the universality of "the human." Once, however, the Chinese understood "the human" very differently. Writing on Mencius, Hall and Ames put this very clearly: "For Mencius, strictly speaking, a human is not a sort of being, but a kind of doing, an achievement" [18] What "being sustainable" and "designing to sustain" then adds up to in sum is "another kind of doing and thus another kind of being." Designing, making things is world-making. Hong Kong *is* on the hinge of worlds. The odds on which way it will turn, is turning, are clear. But the other way, the "seemingly impossible" can and should be contemplated by design—the other design.

17 On *yi,* see Hall and Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius,* 89–110.

18 Ibid., 277.

# Redeveloping Design Education in Hong Kong?

Siu King Chung

**The Making of the Notions of Design**

In Chinese-speaking societies, the word "sheji" (design) has a subtle distinction in relation to engineering, manufacturing, and construction projects. In industrial education, it usually has referred to scientific technology, production, and engineering techniques. For instance, early courses at the Hong Kong Technical College included "Structural Design" from the Department of Civil Engineering, "Transistor Radio Design" from the Department of Electrical Engineering, and "Jig and Tool Design," "Procedure Design," and even "Workshop Design" from the Department of Production Engineering.[1]

These observations indicate how "design" and "design education" in Hong Kong initially aimed at providing technical input in industrial training, intended to develop the local industrial economy in the postwar era. This aim was far removed from any artistic advocacy, even though "art and design" had merged into a distinct category in everyday discourses. Since the 1960s, "visual art" and "design" have tended to be mentioned in the same breath in Hong Kong. Obvious examples include the Education Department's change in the official subject title from "Art & Craft" into "Art and Design" in 1975. Furthermore, local art education syllabi and textbooks invariably have included "Graphic Design," "Three-Dimensional Design," and "Design Principles"; and of most of the design curricular, the like of "Art Appreciation" and "Art History" are indispensable parts. "Art" and "Design" seem to have an inevitably close relationship in Hong Kong—or do they? There was still public debate on whether "design" should be included into the visual arts funding category when the Hong Kong Arts Development Council was established in 1995.[2]

Although the problem of defining the difference between design/art/craft/technology has been the subject of more than a century of debate among industrial powers in the West,[3] the idea of an allegiance between Art and Design has only been invented or adopted in the last thirty to forty years in Hong Kong. Is there then a necessary link between visual art and design? Why do we discuss the two ideas together so frequently?

In this paper, I will focus on the genesis and development of the current "mainstream" design education in Hong Kong (from the

1 Hong Kong Technical College, *Hong Kong Technical College Annual Report 1959/1960.*

2 For the public debates, see the following press articles: Leong, Koon Lai, (1995). "Sheji Guiru Shiyi Fen Yibeigeng, Hang Nei jiang Ban Luntan Pieqing Guanxi" (Design Sharing with Visual Art: A Symposium in the Profession to Clarify the Relation-ship). *Xianggang Lianhe Bao*, September 19, 1995; Fongi (1995). "Yizhanju Xuanju Timing Jiezhi zai Ji, Zhiyi/ Sheji Yunniang Fenjia" (Election Nominations of the Art Development Council will be Closing, Visual Art/ Design are Preparing Their Separation). *Xianggang Jingji Ribao*, September 20, 1995; Lee, Kam Ping (1995). "Gongping de Shiyi Fanchou Dingyi" (A Fair Definition on the Realm of Visual Art). *Xianggang Lianhe Bao*, July 27, 1995; Kan, Tai Keung (1995 a). "Qing Gongping Duidai Yingyong Yishu (Shang)" (Treat Art Applications Fairly (First Part)) *Xianggang Lianhe Bao*, August 7, 1995; Kan, Tai Leung (1995 b). "Qing Gongping Duidai Yingyong Yishu (Xia)" (Treat Art Applications Fairly (Second Part)) *Xianggang Lianhe Bao*, August 8, 1995.

Figure 1 (above)
A 1935 advertisement.

Figure 2 (below)
A 1939 advertisement published in the 3rd Hong Kong Products Expo pamphlet.

early 1950s–1970s), and examine how local education and industrial institutions have strived to interpret and incorporate the concept of "art and design" into their own shaping. In short, I ask how certain concepts find currency in a network of institutions which, in turn, shape the course of their own development and bias. How did these processes of conceptual integration and transition affect early design education in Hong Kong, and do they still have an effect today?

**What Is "Design?" What Is "Design Education?"**

In Hong Kong, or in other Chinese-speaking societies, the concept of design is translated from that of Western industrial powers. According to Matthew Turner, uses of the word "*Sheji*" (design) in China can be dated back to the 1920s; it first appeared in *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary with Chinese Translation,* published by the Shanghai Commercial Press in 1924.[4] The word "sheji" also could be seen in advertisements in Hong Kong as early as the 1930s;[5] and tentative plans of so-called "design education" already were under discussion in the mid-1950s.[6] Nevertheless, the public was still vague about their understanding of "design" until the late 1960s. In a 1969 radio interview about industrial education in Hong Kong, the host began with a question for Mr. Lam Hon Chiu, a lecturer at Northcote College of Education (and a part-time lecturer at the Hong Kong Technical College), about the difference between "industrial and commercial design" and "business administration."[7] From this question, we can recognize how the concept of "design," which we understand today, was still quite unfamiliar to the populace in the 1960s. Interestingly, in a Hong Kong Technical College Annual Report of the same period, the Commercial Design course was grouped under the Commerce Department of the institution.[8] Therefore, it is important to appreciate how and why the notion of "design" has been indefinitely ascribed by the respective education sectors in Hong Kong, and how it gradually developed into a new subject distinct from the technology and engineering disciplines. I believe that this constituted a significant part of the development of the meaning of "design" in Hong Kong, and its appropriation by educational institutions and by other "interested parties."

According to the *Annual Report of Education* for the 1954/55 academic year, the Chinese Manufacturers Union had made an offer to contribute HK$1 million to the Hong Kong government towards the cost of the new campus for the Technical College (afterwards named the Hong Kong Technical College) in Hung Hom, Kowloon. New departments of Production Engineering, Textile Engineering, Industrial Chemistry, and Industrial Design were proposed,[9] and "industrial design" became an official agenda item for the first time. By the end of 1957, the new campus finally was completed, and an evening class in "Commercial Design" [10] was started in the 1959/60 academic year, with thirty-three on-the-job students enrolled in the

3 See, for example, Misha Black, "Lecture to the Institution of Mechanical Engineers"; (September 1972); and Misha Black, "Craft: Art or Design?" Talk to the Institute on College Craft Education, Northampton (April 13,1976); in Avril Blake, ed. *The Black Papers on Design: Selected Writings of the Late Sir Misha Black* (London: Pergamon Press, 1983); and personal notes attached to Misha Black, *Report of Prof. M. Black on Industrial Design Education in Hong Kong, 10 April 1972* (Internal document, School of Design, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University).

4 Matthew Turner, *Ersatz Design—Interactions Between Chinese and Western Design in Hong Kong: 1950s–1960s* (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Royal College of Art, 1993), 32.

5 Ibid., 17.

6 Director of Education, *Hong Kong Annual Report by the Director of Education for the Financial Year 1954/1955*, 48.

7 Interview published in Radio-Television Hong Kong, ed.) *Gongye Jiaoyu Zhinan: Jieshao Xianggang Gongye Xueyuan ji Molichenshan Gongye Xuexiao* (Guidelines to Industrial Education: An Introduction of the Hong Kong Technical College and Morrison Hill Technical Institute), 1969, 72.

first year. [11] In his radio interview, Mr. Lam Hon Chiu recalled that the course mainly included the two categories of "basic design" and "classified design" (for industrial and commercial products). The former involved studies in design principles, color theory, perspective, printing technique, principles of composition, drawing, and the study of new industrial processes; while the latter included studies in trademark and poster design, intaglio printing, textile patterning, packaging design, window display and interior decoration.[12] In the classification of the subjects, "design" seems to have been removed from the technology and engineering disciplines to form part of a fine art type of training. This particularly was obvious in the content of the "basic design" teaching, which revealed a close affinity to the curriculum of the Canton Municipal Arts Institute in the 1920s.[13] The subjects contained in "classified design," on the other hand, pointed to various applications, primarily in the decoration and marketing of products rather than to the more technical aspects of product manufacturing in the earlier sense of the word. Reading between the lines of the interview, Mr. Lam seemed to have identified a new realm of "visual design" which was supposed to be undertaken by a profession other than the technical personnel in the factories: "The design course is not to train technicians or craftsmen, but designers... who could collaborate with technicians or craftsmen in order to serve the function of designing and improving industrial and commercial products." [14]

Whether consciously or not, it is perhaps not accidental that the notion of "design" should be associated with "art" or visual art training. This practice is not so much inherited from the foreign traditions as from the social and industrial rhetoric in Hong Kong during the 1950s and '60s. At that time, the manufacturing industry in Hong Kong was about to take off, and there was an awareness of how to raise the market competitiveness of the products. Within the industrial and commercial sectors, one of these measures was to improve product appearance. Sir Robert Black, then Governor of Hong Kong, emphasized in his speech at the opening ceremony of the 18th Exhibition of Hong Kong Products: "...it concerns the need to improve the appearance and the labeling of our products. An attractive packing is a silent and effective salesman." [15] The so-called "appearance and labeling" at that time generally referred to the means of packaging or sales promotion and the like, which were seen as types of "additives" for product promotion.[16] "Attractive appearance" had become a brand-new capital for the manufacturing industry to promote sales. No wonder that the concept of "design," originally subordinated to the realm of technology and engineering, began to draw closer to the notion of visual or fine art. This, in turn, spurred on the local synthesis of "art and design."

It was, perhaps, as a "silent salesman" that the first evening class in commercial design offered by the Hong Kong Technical

8 Hong Kong Technical College, *Hong Kong Technical College Annual Report 1959/1960*.

9 Director of Education, *Hong Kong Annual Report by the Director of Education for the Financial Year 1954/1955*, 48.

10 Interestingly, the Chinese translation for the Commercial Design Course, "*Shangpin Meishu Sheji Ban*" [Class in Artistic Design for Commercial Products] was not equivalent to the English title. The concept of "art" has been attached to the Chinese term "commercial design," which shows that the idea of design had been closely identified with art. See *Hong Kong Technical College Commercial Design: 1962 Class Students' Handbook* (1964).

11 Hong Kong Technical College *Hong Kong Technical College Annual Report 1959/1960* 7.

12 Interview published in Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK) (ed.), *Gongye Jiaoyu Zhinan: Jieshao Xianggang Gongye Xueyuan ji Molichenshan Gongye Xuexiao* (Guidelines to Industrial Education: An Introduction of Hong Kong Technical College and Morrison Hill Technical School), (1969), 76.

13 The subjects offered by Canton Municpal Arts Institute in the 1920s included: charcoal sketching (from geometric models, still life, utensils, plaster models to figure drawing and landscape painting), art history, color theory, perspective, anatomy, and pattern construction. See Zhao, Shiming, "The Establishment and Development of the Canton Municipal Arts Institute" in *The Hong Kong Alumni of Canton Municipal Arts Institute Newsletter*, (Issue 1, 1963):1.

14 RTHK interview, 1969, 72–73.

15 This statement had been repeated by the governor, and was quoted in speeches by members of the Chinese Manufacturers' Association. See, *The Special Record of the 18th Exhibition of Hong Kong Products* (Hong Kong: The Chinese Manufacturers' Association, 1960), 9. What also is interesting here is that Black did not use the word "design," this might be due to the unfamiliarity of the term to the manufacturers.

College in 1959 founded the roots of local professional design education. Design was seen as being about "visual beauty" or "attractive appearance," and according to popular opinion, visual beauty was a derivative of visual art. Giving industrial products a beautiful appearance then was what design was all about. It was not surprising, therefore, to find that "design education" in Hong Kong had come to pick up on merely the "art school" model, leaving other industrial concerns untouched.[17]

**The Definition of a Designer**

In the 1960s, the industrial sector was keen on promoting local industrial education. Among other requests, it urged the government to provide appropriate training for industrial personnel and to run formal training programs to upgrade existing manpower for the technical and manufacturing sectors. Human resources in Hong Kong's industrial education system, at the time, could be classified into four levels: engineer or technologist, technician, craftsman, and operator. Engineers or technologists mainly were trained at universities under more "theoretical" courses; while the rest were trained at technical institutes or within the relevant industries by more "practical" instruction.[18] The main obligation of Hong Kong Technical College was to help upgrade the level of qualification for the respective practitioners in the industrial sector, i.e., from the level of operators to that of craftsmen, and from craftsmen to technicians and technicians to technologists, etc.[19] If we define a designer's qualification to be one between that of the engineer/technologist and the technician/craftsman, we may consider "design" to be a brand-new skill deriving from both technological theories and manufacturing practices.

Accordingly, Hong Kong Technical College had been planning to establish a Department of Industrial and Commercial Design by 1967, with the objective of offering courses to help enhance technicians' and craftsmen's understanding of new trends and novel knowledge, to affirm their own tastes, and to strengthen their confidence in expressing ideas in written and graphic form.[20] Mr. Lam Hon Chiu attempted to prescribe the following requirements for a designer's training: a student should: (1) possess a high level of skills which enable him to employ sketches and design methods to express his unique ideas; (2) be exposed to creative design studio practices; (3) be able to serve in factories as a design-trainee so as to develop his ability in real practices; (4) be familiar with various technical procedures employed by factories in Hong Kong; (5) develop his creativity and train himself to adapt to changing circumstances including adopting measures to solve problems, and stimulate his curiosity to enrich his knowledge; and (6) become a practical designer with a unique personal style.[21] Hence, a designer should at least possess the technical know-how of a technician, on the one hand, and also an attitude to create, plus the ability to solve

16 In order to conform to the governor's promulgation, the 18th Hong Kong Products Expo in 1960 held the first "Package Decoration Contest" and "Stall Decoration and Display Contest," and even "Product Photographic Contest." The main focus was to improve the appearance of products, and to deal with the "visual design" of product displays. Even the winner of the essay-writing competition held by the Expo—champion of the women's category, with the title of "Use Hong Kong Products to Beautify Our Homes"—stressed the "beautifying" function of the products. Ibid, 62–63.

17 The expectations of the industrial sector regarding design, however, went beyond this. For instance, Sir Chung Sze-yuen, an influential industrialist, then chairman of the Federation of Industries, had long been proposing his three-prong approach: (1) [The manufacturing industries] must strive to climb up the technological ladder in design, in quality, and in the production of the existing products; (2) They must diversify their productions into those requiring higher and more sophisticated technological skills; and (3) They must intensify trade promotion in existing markets and develop new ones. See Chung Sze-yuen, "Hong Kong's Postwar Industrial Development" in *Silver Jubilee Exhibition of Hong Kong Products* (The Chinese Manufacturer's Association, 1967), 48.

18 See interview of Shum, Sing-york and Ching, Yeun-kai, "Industrial Education in Hong Kong" in RTHK (ed.), *Gongye Jiaoyu Zhinan: Jieshao Xianggang Gongye Xueyuan ji Molichenshan Gongye Xuexiao* (Guidelines to Industrial Education: An Introduction of Hong Kong Technical College and Morrison Hill Technical Institute, 1969), 16.

19 See Lam Hon Chiu (RTHK 1969, 73–74).

20 See *Hong Kong Technical College Prospectus* (1967/68), 54; and the Hong Kong Technical College's poster of the Design Graduation Show, 1971.

21 RTHK interview, 1969, 73–74.

problems and be familiar with design techniques and knowledge; in other words, demonstrate a new form of technical competence coupled with a sense of artistry and openness.

**The Institutional Shaping of Design Education**

In just a decade, the commercial design class had evolved into a department at the Hong Kong Technical College. The main directions for setting up the Department of Industrial and Commercial Design were listed in the 1967/68 program scheme, which stated that a designer's training could be achieved through three learning stages. The first included the teaching of "basic elements common to all design" including "the visual approach to ideas" which consisted of "color, pattern, style, texture, graphic presentation, lettering, sourcing ideas, and rendering." The second stage aimed at tackling "particular problems of separate crafts. For example, three-dimensional work such as display and interior design would begin to diverge from two-dimensional work such as printed textiles, commercial art, lettering, and signwriting." In the third stage, students would have to become involved in design practices within local industrial environments, with emphases being placed on local products and international standards.[22] This was all planned in an attempt to raise the design standards and the professional qualifications of local technicians and craftsmen.

While the above outlines the structure for running the department at its early stage, it was likely to have been inherited from an early art-based curriculum, and had yet to develop into the kind of training that fulfilled the needs of the industry, i.e., "to give general training in design, backed by a sound knowledge of the main industrial materials and processes." [23] Based on the requests of the industrial sector, more timely and appropriate courses were added into the three-year Higher Diploma program in industrial design formally launched in 1968. On paper, at least, it attempted to map out a relatively comprehensive program catering for the needs of the industrial communities. It affirmed that the creativeness of the designers needed to complement the scientific knowledge and discipline of the engineer and the technician. And it attempted to ensure that the main emphasis of design training should coincide with the priorities of local manufacturing industries, namely, product design, apparel design, textile design, and graphic and packaging design, and that "the designer is a creative person whose skill in envisaging a product is highly developed, and whose technical awareness makes him an integral part of the production team." [24] Envisaging a product, according to the synopsis of the Graduation Show of the 1971 cohort, "can mean showing the future product in sketch or plan and elevation form, or it can mean making the prototype or mock up in three dimensional form." [25] This was reflected in the following outline of studies: [26]

22 See *Hong Kong Technical College Prospectus* (1967/68), 55.

23 Hong Kong Technical College's poster of the Design Graduation Show, 1971.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

1 **Technical methods, materials and manufacturing procedures:**
Textile knowledge, engineering knowledge, electrical knowledge, garment construction, business studies, and building construction.
2 **Three-dimensional design:**
Design projects in: furniture, environmental studies, industrial products, and prototype making in: metal and wire, plastic, fiberglass, timber, corrugated board, and plaster.
3 **Graphic and studio skills:**
Measured drawing, plans, elevations, sections, layouts, rendering in various media, representational techniques, diagrams, photograms, elementary photography, use of letter-forms and typography, silk-screen printing with ink, and packaging graphics.

The practicality of the program could be seen in its specificity, which involved not only applications of various materials, skills, and processes, but also a general knowledge of different aspects of manufacturing. In short, judging from the program contents, the concepts of "industrial design education" appear to have transcended the early unitary emphasis on "beautiful appearance," and probably had begun to suit the ideology and development of the prospering light industrial sector in Hong Kong.

Apart from the design education model offered by the Technical College, another influential model is believed to have been that of the "fundamental design school." As early as 1967, the Department of Extramural Studies at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) took its first step in running a new design course. The manifestations of an embryonic "fundamental design" can be seen in the introduction to the "Design: The Beginnings," exhibition held at the City Museum and Art Gallery in autumn 1969: [27]

> Just as there is grammar in language, there are rules and principles which underlie every work of design. These rules and principles enable the beginner to explore the various relationships and possibilities of form and color, and finally to arrive at individual creativity which is the main goal of any design training.

The organizers, in explaining the title of this exhibition stated: "This exhibition represents, not the historical beginnings of design, but the beginnings of individual creativity in design among a group of Hong Kong students who have chosen design as their career." [28] Reading between the lines and from the structure of the exhibition,[29] it seemed to favor an individualist attitude more akin to artistic creation than to industrial production.

A keen promoter of this design ideology was Wucius Wong, who worked at the City Museum & Art Gallery, and also was a

27 The exhibition was co-organized by the two design programs of the Department of Extramural Studies, CUHK and the Department of Industrial and Commercial Design, the Hong Kong Technical College. The synopsis of the exhibition may be considered as one of the earliest public articulations of design principles in Hong Kong. See the brochure of the exhibition published by the City Museum and Art Gallery, 1969.

28 Ibid.

29 In the brochure, it is stated: "A section of the exhibition features the students' interpretations of these rules and principles (Fundamental Design Section); another section features the students' personal experiments with these rules and principles (Creative Design Section); and the last section shows how these rules and principles are applied to practical problems (Applied Design Section)."

30 This includes another two design exhibitions, entitled, "Design '71" and "Foundations for Art and Design," again presented by the City Museum and Art Gallery in May 1971 and September 1972, respectively. The former displayed works of the first cohort of Higher Diploma graduates from the Industrial and Commercial Design Course, Hong Kong Technical College; and the latter exhibited design works from students of the Certificate Courses in Fundamentals of Art and Design, offered by the Department of Extramural Studies of the University of Hong Kong (HKU), a similar course offered at about at the same period with that of CUHK.

**Table 1**

| | Department of Extramural Studies, CUHK | Instructor(s) | Department of Industrial and Commercial Design, HKTC | Instructor(s) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Group A: Fundamental Design** | Two-dimensional Design; Three-dimensional Design; Color and Design | Wucius Wong | Printmaking Design | John Hadfield |
| **Group B: Creative Design** | Experimental Design | Wucius Wong | Decoration for Room Dividers | John Hadfield |
| **Group C: Applied Design** | Graphic and Display Design; Individual Projects | Joseph Au<br>John Chan<br>Chui Yung-sang<br>Patrick Chung<br>Fay Ming-gi<br>Joseph Fung<br>King Chia-lun<br>Henry Steiner<br>Van Lau<br>Jennie Wong<br>James Wong<br>Wucius Wong | Textile Design; Display Design | John Hadfield |
| | | | Graphic Design; Packaging Design | Tso Po-kwong |

part-time lecturer in the design program at the Department of Extramural Studies, CUHK. He launched a number of exhibitions of students' work,[30] which had started to arouse public interest and academic attention in design, and he also devoted a lot of effort to popularizing what he believed to be the basic principles of design—fundamental design—through his writing and publications.[31] The concept quickly became an essential element of the official art and design syllabus in primary and secondary schools.[32]

In comparing the projects offered by the Department of Extramural Studies at CUHK with those at the Department of Industrial and Commercial Design, Hong Kong Technical College (Table 1), we can draw two preliminary observations: (1) the program requirements of the former are relatively generic and obviously devoid of the physical resources needed for industrial training, while the latter are more "industry oriented" (including the likes of decoration for room dividers or textile design), and yet more graphic in nature; and (2) the instructors have primarily graphic and fine artist backgrounds, and none have experience in manufacturing industry. This may explain why the projects, by and large, are oriented towards graphic decoration, and why the school of "fundamental design" had such a lack of commensurate resources (both facilities and expertise) for "proper" industrial development.

31 See Wucius Wong, *Principles of Two-Dimensional Design* (NY: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1972); and *Principles of Three-Dimensional Design* (NY: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1977). The Chinese versions of both books subsequently were published in 1974 and 1980, respectively.

32 At the turn of the '70s, subjects which had been called "art" were renamed as "art and design." See *Art Bulletin* No. 1 (January 1971). Published by the Syllabuses and Textbook Committee, Education Department, Hong Kong; which carries an article by a lecturer, David Pun, of the Commercial and Industrial Design Department of the Hong Kong Technical College entitled, "The Meaning of Industrial Design to Secondary School Students" Also see *Suggested Syllabuses for Secondary Schools: Provisional Syllabuses for Art and Design (Form I – III). One of the Series of syllabuses recommended by the Curriculum Development Committee* (Hong Kong: The Government Printer, 1975).

In this sense, the foundation of all design learning is "visual language": language comes before design. Fundamental design means the study of visual elements and principles, the pursuit of alternative images, forms, and spaces in order to create, and to look for perfect formal (graphic or three-dimensional, etc.) qualities. The characteristic (like that of traditional art training) is to allow ample space for experimentation and creativity without actually becoming involved in the complicated processes of manufacturing. This, in other words, was less resource intensive, and it could become an easy model which lent advantage to the promotion and popularization of design, and reduced potential stress when facing the potential resource constraints of the respective societal, educational, and industrial demands.[33]

Perhaps, unconsciously, this idea of "design" gradually was molded into a large scale by those who took a more "unconstrained" attitude towards design education. From the perspective of running a school, the resources needed for this model of design training could be relatively modest, and it could certainly achieve the purpose of cultivating personnel in design, in a rather generic sense.

**Negotiating Schools of Thought**

There were good reasons, therefore, that discourse in "design" and its education orientation had drawn close to the realm of visual art, or to so-called "decoration and packaging" (later called graphic design or graphic communication) at the expense of the early technical conceptions of design training mentioned above. This kind of change gradually was brought about and argued for by various interested parties and schools of thought promoted by the respective authorities. Adding to this, resource constraints imposed on the institutions also had led to the "simplification" of the curriculum of local design education. If divorced from technological knowledge and technical know-how, design training would only become formalistic, favoring appearance and styling, but not "design" in the full sense of the word.

In this regard, during the 1960s and '70s, and while local "design education" was still in the making, several proposals for its future were under consideration. For instance: Sir Misha Black, from the United Kingdom, was invited to evaluate the status of Hong Kong design education and to propose models for upgrading local professional design programs. His recommendations, among others, included, that, "(1) The Department of Mechanical Engineering should be allowed to develop specialization in product engineering, and the Department of Electrical Engineering should be invited to consider the viability of such an option for a few of its students; (2) all engineering departments should include familiarization lectures within their courses in the social and aesthetic aspects of engineering design; (3) the Department of Architecture at the University

33 The lack of resources was evident in the *Final Report of the Polytechnic Planning Committee*, July 1971; in which it considered relocating the Industrial & Commercial Design Department because the Technical College was to be upgraded into the Hong Kong Polytechnic:

> This area of study is offered at the Technical College. It was thought that it would be advantageous for students studying in this area to have ready access to the engineering and technology workshops to do technical processes in their experiments on materials, and in making prototypes of their designs. However, as long as this department is provided with design workshops equipped with hand tools and comparatively simple and inexpensive machine tools, the needs of the students can be met. In any case, the training of students is such that they themselves are not capable of using complicated workshop equipment. For the production of difficult designs, students can always come to the college at Hung Hom [i.e., HKTC] to seek the guidance from the workshop staff on the technical aspects. It is, therefore, considered that this area of study should be sited in Wan Chai [i.e., Morrison Hill Technical Institute]"; 38.

should establish a course in industrial and interior design, the industrial design content being oriented towards the needs of the building industry but not restricted to it." [34]

But why was this set of plans not accepted and carried forward, when the Design Department of the Technical College, and the design course at the Department of Extramural Studies (CUHK) were able to develop? This probably was due to the lack of clarity in the classification of local education hierarchies; especially when designer training was defined as falling between that of engineers and technicians (see above); and hence, a designer's vague "professional" qualification would make educational institutions difficult to find it a place, and therefore unable to solicit proper resources for its development.

Another example: in order to prepare for the upgrading of the Technical College to the Polytechnic in 1972, the College's administration established an advisory panel at the end of 1969, "to draw up priorities in the formation of courses, and to lay down a curriculum for each course and ensure that it meets the needs of industry" for the Department of Industrial and Commercial Design.[35] At that time, Professor Michitaka Yoshioka of Chiba University in Japan was invited to assist in the process of completing the report, which proposed a broader outlook on industrial design training than the ones implemented later on. In the first place, the report confirmed the need for five different kinds of programs within the industrial and commercial environments. The programs, which ideally were to be offered in a four-year mode, included: Product Design (electrical and mechanical products); Product Design (general products such as furniture and three-dimensional design, etc.); Apparel Design; Textile Design; and Graphic and Packaging Design. The resulting qualification was set at the level of technologist (at the undergraduate level). Program contents were suggested in an initial three-year mode: [36]

Design Theory—comprising design semantics; design iconics; ergonomics; and sociological, economics and aesthetic aspects;

Relevant Studies—comprising material science; mathematics and computer familiarization; physics; advanced English; psychology; marketing and market research; and history of subject;

Studio Practice—comprising all practical design work; project work; observational drawing; color study; and drawing office procedure; and

Workshop Practice—comprising materials familiarization; relevant techniques; model and prototype making; bench work and advanced machine work.[37]

34 Misha Black, *Report of Prof. M. Black on Industrial Design Education in Hong Kong,* April 10, 1972. (Internal document, School of Design, the Hong Kong Polytechnic University)

35 Hong Kong Polytechnic Advisory Panel, *A Programme for a Course in Industrial Design to Be Incorporate Within the Polytechnic,* 1969. (Internal document, School of Design, the Hong Kong Polytechnic University)

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.

**Constraints**

It is evident that this proposal differed a great deal from the earlier articulation, and that it was not so removed from the distinctive technical characteristics of the technology and manufacturing sector. But why was this substantial proposal not adopted? The obvious explanation was a lack of resources. Later in 1973, and in preparation for the transition from the Technical College to Polytechnic, Professor Yoshioka was formally invited to write program proposals for two departments. The recommendations he made in his 1974 report had become compromised; they now consisted of two categories of subjects which included: (a): introduction of engineering fundamentals; introduction to basic tools and machine operations; introduction to graphic semiology, media and materials; introduction to design fundamentals; and (b) art appreciation (history of human intelligence with visual aids); history of design; design methods; ergonomics; properties and fabrication of materials; and social behavior of various regions (preferential behavior). All of the above would be supplemented by lectures including product design surveys, analysis and development, etc.[38] Originally conceived as a four-year course with an international perspective, again the program was not adopted within its original intention.

As for facilities, the suggestion of the Advisory Panel was to establish: a mechanical workshop; an electrical engineering workshop; a tailoring and dressmaking workshop; a dye, roller-print, and weave workshop; a press-print and experimental workshop; a timber workshop; a paint workshop, a plaster workshop; and a photography workshop with darkroom. It requested that the design department do its best to establish independent facilities.[39] But these proposals had been curtailed due to the shortage of space and resources and, as a result, the program concerning the "electrical and mechanical" side of product design disappeared from the later reports and departmental discussions. In fact, until quite recently,[40] the design department at the Hong Kong Polytechnic continued to exclude the more technical and scientific aspects of design in favor of styling or visual-based design. We can see that design courses have suffered the fate of being screened and simplified from the early planning stages to the final process of implementation.

Apart from the program's duration and resource constraints, the shortage of various kinds of professional design personnel also contributed to the unitary style and practice in design teaching. Teachers and designers had distinct professional competencies and expertise. Those who were willing to teach full-time did not necessarily have strong industrial and technical backgrounds. They would not necessarily have been able to conceive course materials and projects relevant to a comprehensive context of industrial production; or it would have been difficult for them to apply creative experimental outcomes to specific industrial and commercial settings. The Design Department at the Hong Kong Polytechnic

38 Michitaka Yoshioka, "Self Observations and Exploratory Study on the Scope of Design in Education Within the Hong Kong: A Report Submitted to the Academic Committee and the Board of Governors of the Hong Kong Polytechnic, Oct. 1974" (Internal document, School of Design, the Hong Kong Polytechnic University).

39 Hong Kong Polytechnic Advisory Panel (1969)," A Programme for a Course in Industrial Design to Be Incorporate within the Polytechnic" (Internal document, School of Design, the Hong Kong Polytechnic University).

40 Now it seems to be quite different from the past, especially with the craze for information technology, where IT education is under the government's advocacy and support. At the end of 2000, the School of Design, Hong Kong Polytechnic University, held the "3rd International Conference of Computer-aided Industrial Design and Conceptual Design," jointly organized with the Industrial Centre of the same university. Participants started to discuss anew the relationship between design, technology and manufacturing industry. The resources allocated today perhaps facilitate the creation of a design education that would be quite distinct from the previous endeavors.

often received complaints from external consultants about the lack of appropriate instructors—especially in the fields of product design and costume design—during the internal review process. The opening remarks of Professor Yoshioka's report explained the scarcity of the ideal design teacher: [41]

> …being the latter part of the twentieth century with highly developed scientific, technological skills and the overwhelming inflow of information in various forms, coupled with complexities in management, distribution and consumption systems, it is well-nigh impossible to locate an instructor fluent in overall global knowledge... There is an obvious inadequacy of staff members especially with regard to the many areas in the field of design that need to be covered. It is understood that there has been great difficulty in terms of staff recruitment and, as a result, sometimes staff members are increased not so much as to fill the need to carry out certain study programmes which have been neglected due to the lack of qualified teachers, but just for the sake of increasing manpower....

Staffing was, and perhaps still is, a major factor in the development of any nascent design program; the availability and appropriateness of human resources directly affects program planning, design assumptions, and practical orientation. The knowledge an instructor possesses will determine the outcome of the teaching, program and its orientation, and of the students' competencies and perspectives. These perspectives in turn will help to shape future concepts of design and design education.

**In Conclusion**

The issues Hong Kong faced are not, in effect, new or unfamiliar, but they were and are of prime importance. Design education, especially in a community such as Hong Kong which in many ways is still culturally "self-contained," is of fundamental importance to the development of design practice, concepts, methods and, above all, in the formation of a respected and respectable design profession. The fact that the fundamental decision-making process that underpinned the establishment of design education in Hong Kong was largely resource-driven not only characterized its future, but also demonstrated a lack of willingness to understand the potential offered by design. Hong Kong industry still is suffering from its effects. Predicated on shortsightedness and a lack of vision design education, to this day, has served to constrain and stultify the proper development and appreciation of professional design in Hong Kong.

41 Michitaka Yoshioka, Report (1974), 8 and 13.