



Fig. 206. A woman shows to Nikita Khrushchev and Richard Nixon how to use a washing machine during the American Exposition in Moscow, 1959. Source: wikicommons.

5.1.2 The Integral Collectivization of Life¹

In the agricultural world where ponds, ditches and roads articulate the spatial fabric of the rural realm, the character of the Vietnamese traditional housing, based on aggregation of family lineages, points to particular conceptions of dwelling. It is assumed that the state must ‘turn a blind eye’ to a multitude of processes and mediations between grassroots agents, be they civil servants, smallholders, service brokers or tenants.² Soviet industrial design and its representations of socialist welfare were exported to an eastern and less industrialized country like Vietnam, which was immersed in an endless series of wars and under severe deprivation of consumer goods. The lapse between the representation of Soviet modernity and rural and pre-colonial social practices constructed a particular universe, scarcely represented by the official media, which nevertheless gave rise to one of the most culturally rich environments in post-war Vietnam.

As a new socialist country, Vietnam would welcome a plethora of technical advisors from other sister nations. Soviet architects had already assisted in the elaboration of the new Masterplan for Beijing; the frictions between the foreign architects, who pushed for the implementation of the Moscow ring road layout, and their local counterparts were narrated by Li Sichang, most renowned architecture scholar in China and firm advocate of the preservation of its built heritage. Leon Hoa, a French-trained architect, was the main introducer of European avant-garde

1 A substantial part of this section is taken from the author’s article ‘Apropiaciones Del Espacio Doméstico En La Vivienda Socialista: Una Mirada a La Unión Soviética y Vietnam’. *En Blanco. Revista de Arquitectura*, no. 32: 130–42.

2 Stephanie Geertman, ‘The Self-Organizing City in Vietnam; Processes of Change and Transformation in Housing in Hanoi’ (Technische Universiteit Eindhoven, 2007).



Fig. 207. Housing project for the workers of a tractor factory using prefabricated panels. Minsk, 1960. Photography by Carl Mydas. Source: Life Magazine.

Fig. 208. American architects examining a model of Soviet housing with prefabricated walls at the American Exhibition. New York, 1959. Photography by Walter Sanders. Source: Life Magazine.

rationalism into the housing programs of the People's Republic. Hoa's most remarkable contribution was to adapt the postulates of the Modern Movement to the harsh technical and financial restrictions of the Chinese context, while responding to very different cultural realities.³ When Vietnam gained independence in 1954, the Soviet Union was immersed in a set of political and industrial transformations that would have consequences over the upcoming housing program in the new republic. On 31 July 1957, the Khrushchev's regime had embarked on an ambitious industrialised mass housing program.⁴ New prefabrication technologies were to be developed that would allow mass housing construction. The housing problem would be approached from a scientific-technical point of view that would demand a reconversion of the productive fabric of the Soviet Union, ending the era of Stalinist neo-classicist *wastefulness*.⁵ During his time in the Moscow municipal government, Khrushchev advocated the standardisation of construction methods and the rationalisation of the housing programme.⁶ When he rose to power in 1953, his ideas were put into practice on a scale never seen before. Between 1960 and 1964 residential space in the USSR increased from 958 million square metres to 1182 million square metres.⁷

Until Stalin's death, Soviet housing production prioritized aesthetics over pragmatism. The pretence of housing the proletariat in *workers' palaces* proved to lack economic logic. Although many neo-classical socialist housing buildings still survive today, they were significantly insufficient to meet the real needs of

3 Zhi Luo, 'An Alternative Path. Architect Leon Hoa and His 1950's' (The University of Hong Kong, 2018) ; Leon Hoa, *Reconstruire La Chine - Trente Ans d'urbanisme - 1949-1979* (Paris: Editions du Moniteur, 1981).

4 Decree on the national development of housing in the Soviet Union, published by the *Pravda newspaper* on 2 August 1957.

5 Davies, R. W.; Melanie Ilič. 'From Khrushchev (1935-6) to Khrushchev (1956-64): Construction Policy Compared'. *Political Economy Research in Soviet Archives*. Warwick: University of Warwick, 2007.

6 Khrushchev rose to the Party leadership in the city of Moscow in 1934. In 1935 he presented his vision of the industrialisation of housing construction, which would be implemented twenty years later. See Davies, "From Khrushchev (1935-6) to Khrushchev (1956-64)," 5.

7 Davies, "From Khrushchev (1935-6) to Khrushchev (1956-64)," 24.

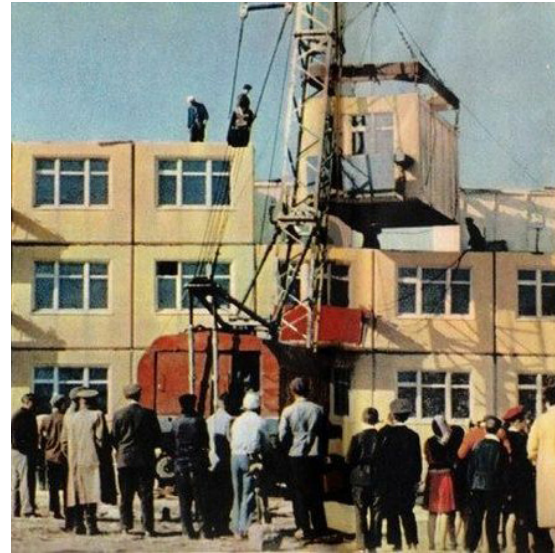


Fig. 209.
A group of residents observes the installation of prefabricated housing modules in the Soviet Union. Source: Istoriya Portal

Fig. 210.
Soviet athlete Rafael Tchimichkian playing with his son at his home. June 1956, Russia. Photography by Lisa Larsen. Source: Life Magazine.

the population. Another housing solution was the *kommunalka*: pre-revolutionary buildings were collectivised and subdivided to house several families sharing kitchens and toilets. Many of these communes persist in the former USSR. The functional adaptation of the bourgeois architecture, often sporting imposing facades onto elegant avenues, would have to be addressed specifically for case, remaining subject to the drifts and compromises of the intimate facets of its inner life. It is reasonable to assume that the restrictions imposed by the morphology of the inherited dwellings, their limited supply, and the atomisation of the constructive and spatial solutions impeded the *kommunalka* model to be scaled as a solution to the USSR housing problem.

The Soviet industry, previously focused on the production of industrial goods, had to provide the new occupants with furniture and utensils.⁸ The 1957 decree would generate a novel aesthetic code, investing the new living spaces with a symbolism appropriate for the Age of Space Exploration.⁹ This visual language would constitute a contemporary style with its own character (a response to American design) that would be named *Khrushchev Modern* by Susan Reid.¹⁰ The interiors of the Soviet family home would be furnished by industrial designers, whose mission recovered the experimental avant-garde spirit interrupted in the 1920s.¹¹

Due to the incentive system of the planned economy, factory managers usually opted to produce large and expensive consumer goods in order to meet production

8 Susan E. Reid, "Khrushchev Modern. Agency and Modernization in the Soviet Home," *Cahiers Du Monde Russe* 47, no. 1–2 (2006): 231.

9 Davies, "From Khrushchev (1935-6) to Khrushchev (1956-64)," 11.

10 Reid, "Khrushchev Modern," 232.

11 Reid, "Khrushchev Modern," 239.

quotas - measured in working hours - while the product's functionality, ultimately endorsed by the user's satisfaction, was not always be the best. This misalignment resulted, for example, in the production of bulky, profusely ornate furniture that lacked utility for the average household. Tools like knives and hammers would feature attractive handles while their steel parts were prone to break easily. Given the importance of consumer goods in the Seventh Five-Year Plan (1959-1965) and the need for new artefacts such as household appliances and private cars, factories were forced to aim beyond mere industrial metrics and improve the appeal of their products. In order to mimic free market pricing mechanisms, incentives shifted from production to demand. Products had to be conceived and fabricated with the aim of being attractive to the public.

This implied that the industrial designer would have to go beyond the ideation of new production systems: the functionality and even the symbolic meaning of objects would have to be questioned and redefined. The transformation of Soviet housing into modern homes would be crowned by *discursive interventions*: a visual imaginary appropriate to the Soviet Union's role as the industrialised and nuclearised leader of the socialist orb, producing a new system of visual representations that would be communicated through exhibitions, cinema, magazines, and interior design.¹² The mass media, schools, universities, parents' associations, and the *Zhilishchno-ekspluatatsionnaia Kontora* or ZhEKs (maintenance office) would help explain to new tenants from Leningrad to Irkutsk how to furnish and decorate their new *Khrushchyovka*. This didactic effort had, for Reid, a secondary function: to convey and celebrate the party's achievements, celebrating the improved living conditions augured by Marxist theory by inscribing "public meanings into the private experience".¹³ According to Miriam Dobson, the Communist Party did not necessarily conceive the individual flat as a private space.¹⁴ The notion of *uiut*, (home comfort) would become the primary goal of interior design and was equated to a science because of its *Domovodstvo* (functionalism). It was therefore necessary to educate the population on how to inhabit their new prefabricated dwelling in a socialist manner: austere but efficient.¹⁵ The aim, according to Reid, was to redirect trends in personal taste and delegitimise traditional furnishing practices characteristic of the Soviet Union's vast ethnic and cultural plurality.¹⁶

12 Reid, "Khrushchev Modern," 255.

13 Reid, "Khrushchev Modern," 255.

14 Miriam Dobson, "The Post-Stalin Era: De-Stalinization, Daily Life, and Dissent," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 12, no. 4 (2011): 905-24.

15 Diagrams based on plans available at Geertman, *The Self-Organizing City in Vietnam; Processes of Change and Transformation in Housing in Hanoi*, (The Netherlands: Technische Universiteit Eindhoven, 2007).

16 Reid, Susan E. 'Cold War Binaries and the Culture of Consumption in the Late Soviet Home'. *Journal of Historical Research in Marketing* 8, no. 1 (2016): 17-43.



Fig. 212. Masterplan for Hanoi 2000, made by Leningrad planners in 1980. Source: Geertman, Stephanie. 2007. 'The Self-Organizing City in Vietnam; Processes of Change and Transformation in Housing in Hanoi'. Technische Universiteit Eindhoven



Fig. 211. City Project. Painting by Klavdia Osheva, 1967. Source: SocMod.

5.1.2.1 The Khu Tập Thể: Socialist Housing in Vietnam

With the passing of Stalin in 1953, independent Vietnam had no opportunity to be exposed to the Socialist Realism that had spread from Berlin to Mongolia. Instead, Khrushchev's vision, communicated through the visual imaginary of the Atomic Age, would be implemented in the sleepy river villages of Hanoi thanks to the technical advisors of the Leningrad Institute.¹⁷

Classical Marxism as a theory, as Kuan-Hsing Chen states, was never be able to free itself from its Eurocentrism; in practice, however, it generated a series of decentralizing movements of which the Khu Tập Thể ('Collective housing') would be the most eloquent exponents.¹⁸ After the break with the USSR in 1991, China had increased its international assistance projects, becoming one of the largest donor countries outside the Development Assistance Committee or DAC. In 1964 the white paper *Eight Principles of Overseas Technical and Economic Assistance* was published. In this foreign countries, architects were generally chosen from among prestigious local personalities, such as Vann Molyvan for the National Stadium in Phnom Penh or Frederich Silaban for the National Sports Stadium in Ulanbator and the GBK in Jakarta; on other occasions committees of Chinese architects were appointed, as was the case of the 'Bandaranaike Memorial International Conference Hall' in Sri Lanka (1973) designed by the Beijing Institute of Industrial Design. Chinese international aid consisted mainly in the construction of symbolic

17 The Leningrad Plan was published in the Leningradskaya Panorama, no. 8, August 1983, pp.26-29, as documented by Logan, p. 195.

18 Kuan-Hsing Chen, *Asia as a Method: Toward Deimperialization* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 70.

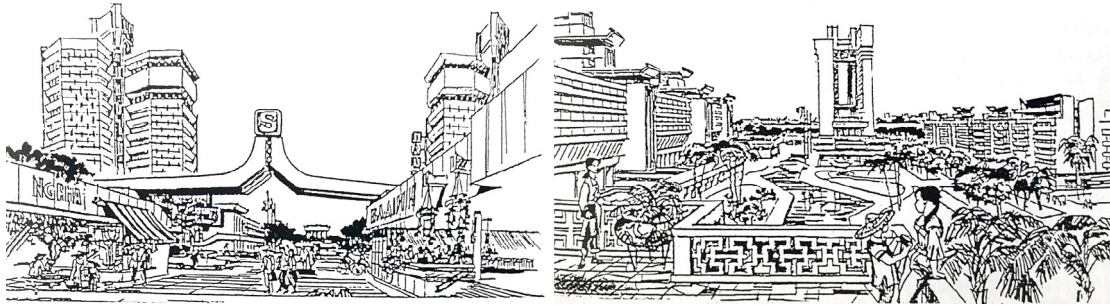


Fig. 213. Visualizations of the Leningrad City Plan on the Red River, published in *Leningradskaya Panorama* vol. 8, n. 31, August 1981, p. 26-29. Source: Logan, William S., *Hanoi, Biography of a City* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000), p. 153.

buildings, among which stadiums were the most appropriate architectural type for the representation of the collectivist narrative.¹⁹

After the proclamation of independence and the end of colonialism, the Vietnamese faced a significant new disruption to their old way of life. Collective living became one of the facets of the *integral collectivisation* of society. The French mansions were seized and subdivided to accommodate several families similarly as it was done at the *Kommunalka*. The colonial villas located in Ba Đình, the administrative heart of the capital, were allocated to senior officials of the central and municipal authorities, and are today the best preserved among this type of buildings. Other houses were converted into the headquarters of state agencies, and a third group was subdivided into multi-family dwellings under joint ownership, and are the buildings that have undergone the most intense transformations to this day.²⁰ However, despite their strong symbolism, these actions were far from satisfying the housing needs.

The first *microrayon* residential quarters in Hanoi were started almost simultaneously with the launching Khrushchev's housing programme. Although transport in post-independence Vietnam consisted mainly of bicycles with some Soviet-made wheeled vehicles,²¹ these neighbourhoods followed CIAM principles and featured a hierarchical provision of basic services, segregation of vehicular and pedestrian traffic, and were located next to the new industrial zones.²² They would be denominated *Khu Tập Thể* (collective housing buildings, or KTT). Approximately half of all new housing in Hanoi during the period 1954-1989 was built on this model, totalling thirty new neighbourhoods with a total of 450 hectares.²³ The first KTTs would consist of single-storey attached homes with common spaces and kindergartens, as in those sited in Mai Động (1954-60). Toilets and kitchens were shared and separated from the living quarters, following the usual practice of keeping them out of the main living area. Architect Natalia Dmitrievna Sulimova, a mem-

19 Wei Chang, Charlie Xue, and Guanghui Ding, "Architecture of Diplomacy: Chinese Construction Aid in Asia, 1950-1976," *Arena Journal of Architecture Research*, 4.1 (2019), 3.

20 Tran, "Fabrication Du Logement Planifié Sous Forme de "KDTM" (Ku Do Ti Moi) a Hanoi: La Ville de Quartiers Ou/et La Ville de Projets ?" (Toulouse: Université Toulouse, 2016).

21 Generally, the ZIL trucks (*Zavod imeni Likhachyova*), which were adapted for either industrial or military use.

22 Phuong, "The Impact of 'Informal' Building Additions on Interior/Exterior Space in Hanoi's Old Apartment Blocks (KTT)," *Architecture in the Fourth Dimension* Nov (2011): 131-38.

23 Tran, "Fabrication Du Logement," 608; Nami Hong and Saehoon Kim, "Persistence of the Socialist Collective Housing Areas (KTTs): The Evolution and Contemporary Transformation of Mass Housing in Hanoi, Vietnam," *Journal of Housing and the Built Environment*, no. 0123456789 (2020): 604.



Fig. 215. Collective housing blocks in Trung Tự in Đống Đa District, excerpted from Logan, William S., *Hanoi, Biography of a City* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000), p. 124.

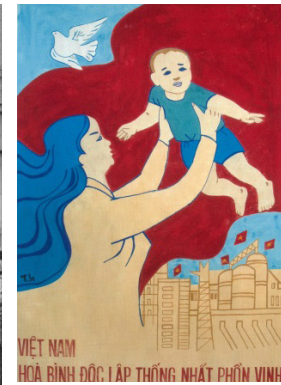


Fig. 216. Vietnamese propaganda poster: 'Peace, Independence, Unity, Prosperity'. c. 1972. Source: Hanoi.



Fig. 214. Abbas Attar, *Construcción de una barriada de viviendas socialistas*, 1975.

ber of the team of Boris Mezentsev (one of the authors of the Soviet monumental buildings in Hanoi) designed some of these apartment blocks, particularly notable for using Soviet pre-stressed modules and deploying modern machinery and cranes.²⁴ The first high-rise development, and one of the most significant because of its proximity to the city centre, was Nguyễn Công Trứ (1963); it consisted of a *micro-rayon* neighbourhood with three- to five-storey brick blocks built with North Korean prefabricated modules. Provided with running water and green areas, Nguyễn Công Trứ became the most desirable location in the city, housing influential members of the Party and military.²⁵

²⁴ Logan, *Hanoi, Biography of a City*, 196.

²⁵ Drummond and Thanh Binh Nguyen, "The Rise and Fall of Collective Housing: Hanoi between Vision and Decision," in *Socialist and Post-Socialist Urbanisms: Critical Reflections from a Global Perspective*, edited by

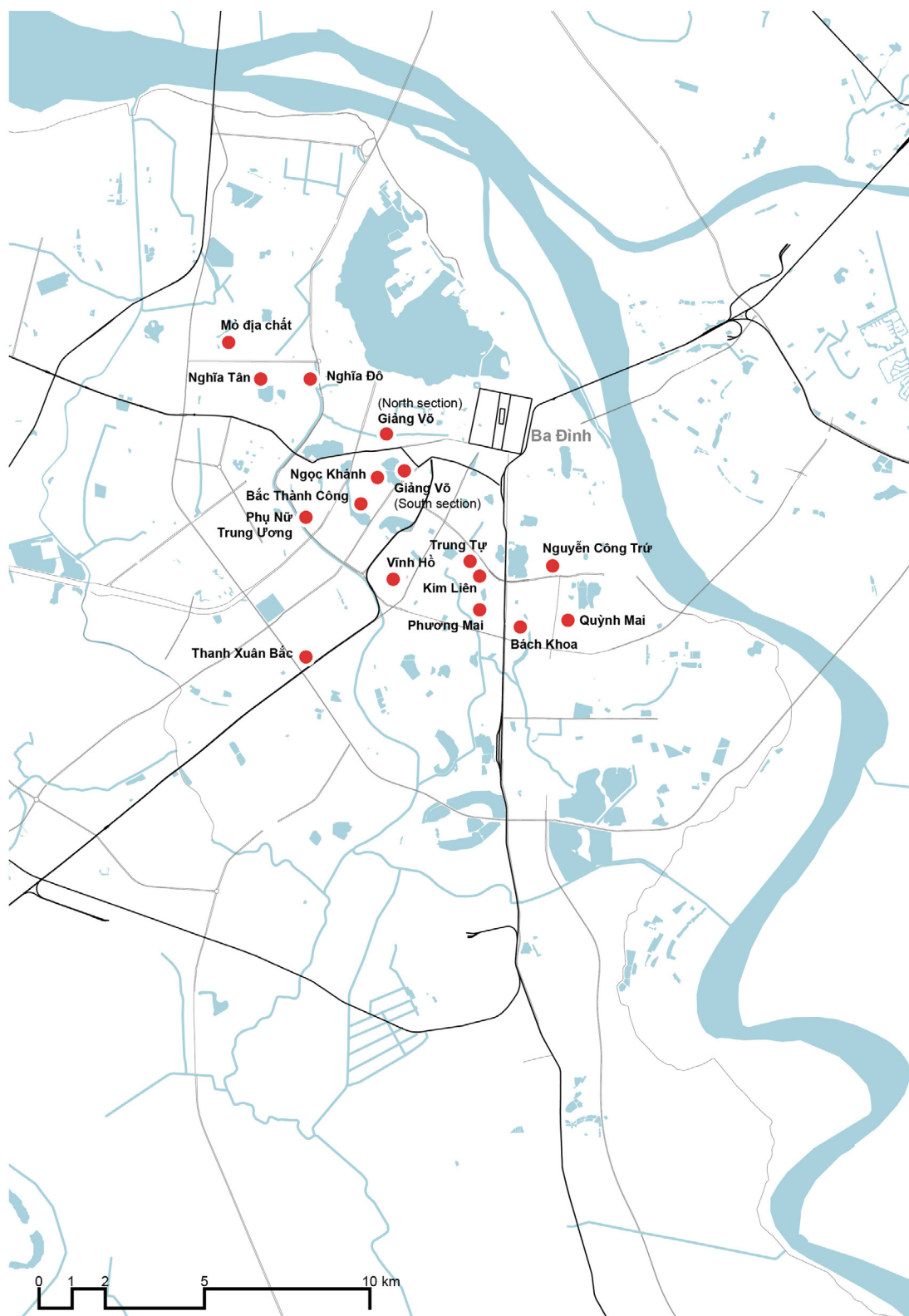


Fig. 217. Location of the khu tập thể housing sectors surveyed in July of 2019, relating to the Leningrad Plan as collected by William Logan in 'Russians on the Red River: The Soviet Impact on Hanoi's Townscape, 1955–90'. Source: author.



Fig. 218. Self-built apartment modifications in Khu Tập Thể housing, Hanoi. Source: author, 2019.

5.1.2.2 Hanging Gardens and Flying Pigs

In 1989 Vietnam began a period of reforms called *Đổi Mới* (Renaissance) which was accompanied by the gradual introduction of private ownership and free enterprise. At that time most apartment blocks were overcrowded and poorly maintained. Corridors were cramped with makeshift kitchens and cookers vented smoke into the common areas, since the Vietnamese preferred to avoid cooking indoors. Shoes (which, as in the rest of Asia, must be taken off before entering the homes) piled along with all kinds of cabinets and washed clothes. Neighbours went so far as to refurbish shared toilets to raise pigs and chickens, providing themselves with valuable protein that was in short supply at that time.²⁶ The rural life penetrated the modern city (*nông thôn hóa*) and took over the interstices between the concrete blocks. Vietnamese families, even today, still prefer to extract culinary activities from spaces conventionally allocated as kitchens; they did so when they did not feel comfortable in cramped shared kitchens and they still do it today when they place cookers, pots, and vegetables in the common areas of modern flats. Kitchens are spaces at the crossroads between industrial design and everyday life; they mediate between activities as important as food preparation and family socialisation. They must also be subject to the technical requirements of the most complex devices found in the modern home, such as refrigerators and ovens. It was then natural that the collective kitchens in both the *Khrushchyovka* and the KTTs revealed the advantages and shortcomings of planning and confronted them with everyday domestic practice.

Aware that the legal framework could not adapt quickly enough to social transformations, the state prioritised economic development over the strict oversight

Lisa B.W. Drummond and Douglas Young. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), 74.

26 Ken McLean, "The Rehabilitation of an Uncomfortable Past: Everyday Life in Vietnam during the Subsidy Period (1975-1986)," *History and Anthropology* 19, no. 3 (2008): 294.



Fig. 219. Self-built apartment modifications in Khu Tập Thể Bắc Thành Công, Hanoi. Source: author, 2019.

that characterised the *pure* socialist period. Such laxity gave way to a widespread encroachment frenzy that became particularly noticeable in the collective flats. While looking to increase the living area, residents extended their balconies with boxes projecting onto the public realm.²⁷ The spaces between blocks became characterised by illegal cantilevered structures, popularly known as *Chuồng cọp* ('tiger cages').²⁸ A *Chuồng cọp* is usually supported by steel beams attached to the main structure of the building.²⁹ While its width is limited to the dimensions of the corresponding apartment, its cantilevered length depends on informal agreements between the surrounding units. Through negotiations between neighbours - and always with the acquiescence of the *Phường* (sub-district) officials - the inhabitants of the upper floors could lean their extended rooms on the structures in lower levels. The *Chuồng cọp* often have ventilation slits, fit to Hanoi's subtropical climate, and host a variety of domestic furnishings such as clotheslines, flower pots or charcoal-burning cookers. The failure of the KTT shared kitchens (a concept imported from the *Khrushchyovka*) due to their small size, climatic unsuitability and the persistence of rural customs,³⁰ encouraged the emergence of this illegal constructions.³¹

According to Koh, the one-party penetration of society was as much about establishing a system of surveillance as one of mediation. Control could be repressive and strict, but it could also be permissive and compassionate if deemed convenient.

27 Phuong, "The Impact of 'Informal' Building Additions."

28 *Chuồng cọp* is a scornful term that alludes to the narrow cages traditionally used by tiger hunters. Although frequently used, it is politically incorrect because it is associated with torture devices used during the Vietnam War.

29 Francisco Garcia Moro, "Chuồng Cọp (Vietnam)," Global Informality Project, 2019, accessed 4 April 2022.

30 Geertman, "The Self-Organizing City in Vietnam."

31 Phuong, "The Impact of 'Informal' Building Additions."



Fig. 220. Self-built apartment modifications in Khu Tập Thể Thanh Xuân Bắc, Hanoi. Source: author, 2019.

This adaptability facilitated the continuation of communism in Vietnam to this day despite the bloody wars and hardships endured.³² These informal arrangements between neighbours were based on mutual trust, for which *giving face*, a form of symbolic capital underpinned by personal reputation that was necessary in the absence of other legal guarantees. Authorities put their authority temporarily in abeyance; they would intervene only in case of conflict between individuals.

32 Koh, *Wards of Hanoi* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2006).



Fig. 221. Bách Khoa



Fig. 222. Bắc Thành Công



Fig. 223. Thanh Xuân Bắc



Fig. 224. Thanh Xuân Bắc



Fig. 225. Phương Mai



Fig. 226. Quỳnh Mai



Fig. 228. Phương Mai



Fig. 227. Thanh Xuân Bắc

All photos by the author, 2019.



Fig. 229. Self-built apartment modifications in Khu Tập Thể Giảng Võ, Hanoi. Source: author, 2019.



Fig. 230. Self-built apartment modifications in Khu Tập Thể Giảng Võ, Hanoi. Source: author, 2019.

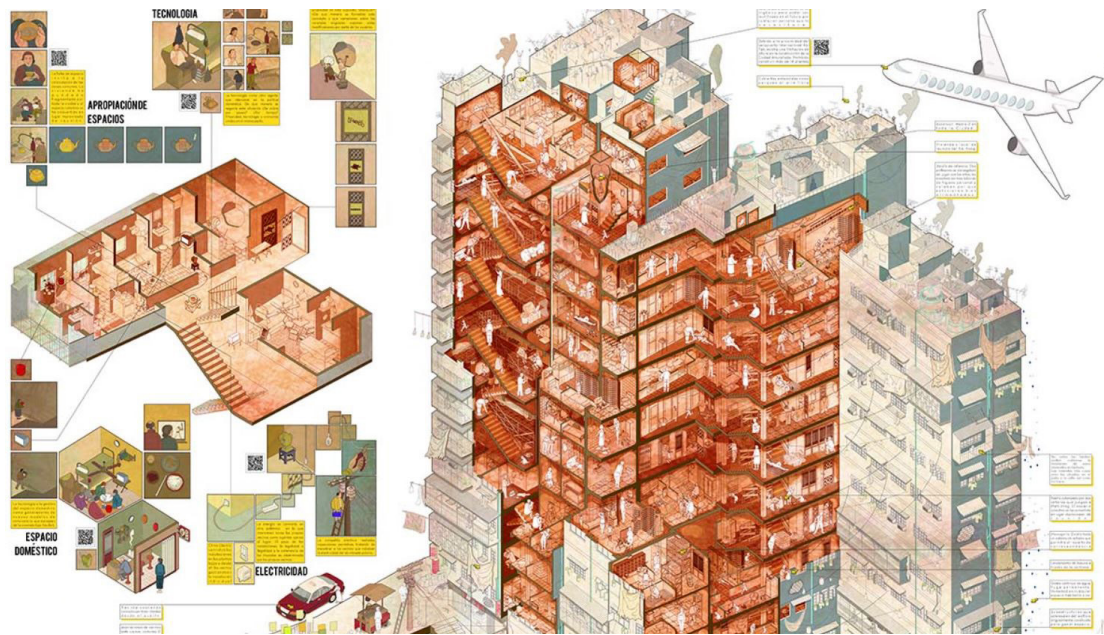


Fig. 231. Detail of architectural drawings of *Historia de una Lobotomía*, Master Thesis of Mari Ángeles Peñalver Izaguirre and David Jiménez Iniesta at University of Alicante, 2014. Source: University of Alicante.

5.1.3 The Charms of Cyberpunk

5.1.3.1 A Visual Universe of Urban Decay

The Kowloon Walled Citadel was made world famous by Greg Girard's photographic Reportage *City of Darkness: Life In Kowloon Walled City* months before its demolition.¹ Only a few audiovisual works had the opportunity to exploit the striking spatiality of the enclave, such as the martial arts films *Bloodsport* (1988) and *Crime Story* (1993), shot shortly before its final demolition and when most of the population had already been relocated (fig. 232).² It is probably thanks to the fact that the Citadel did not have the opportunity to be *disneyfied* or *gentrified*, and turned into a sterilised representation of itself, that its image became part of the collective visual imaginary.

The signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984 cleared the way for the transfer of sovereignty over Hong Kong, allowing the two countries to address a number of urban governance issues in a coordinated manner.³ As a consequence of the illegal status of in the Walled City of Hong Kong, located outside British jurisdiction and without any effective monitoring by Chinese authorities, its inhabitants found themselves unable to present legal titles of their apartments or assets within the citadel, a situation that was resolved by the administration's acceptance, to some extent, of informal proofs of possession. In 1987, it was mutually agreed to demolish the Walled City of Hong Kong and rehouse its inhabitants. The Thesis by Mari Ángeles Peñalver Izaguirre and David Jiménez Iniesta *Historia*

1 Greg Girard, *City of Darkness: Life In Kowloon Walled City* (London: Watermark, 1999).

2 Newt Arnold, *Bloodsport* (USA, 1988); Kirk Wong, *Crime Story* (Hong Kong, 1993).

3 Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and Government of the People's Republic of China, 'Joint Declaration of the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Government of the People's Republic of China on the Question of Hong Kong', 1984 <<https://www.cmab.gov.hk/en/issues/jd2.htm>> [accessed 16 February 2020].

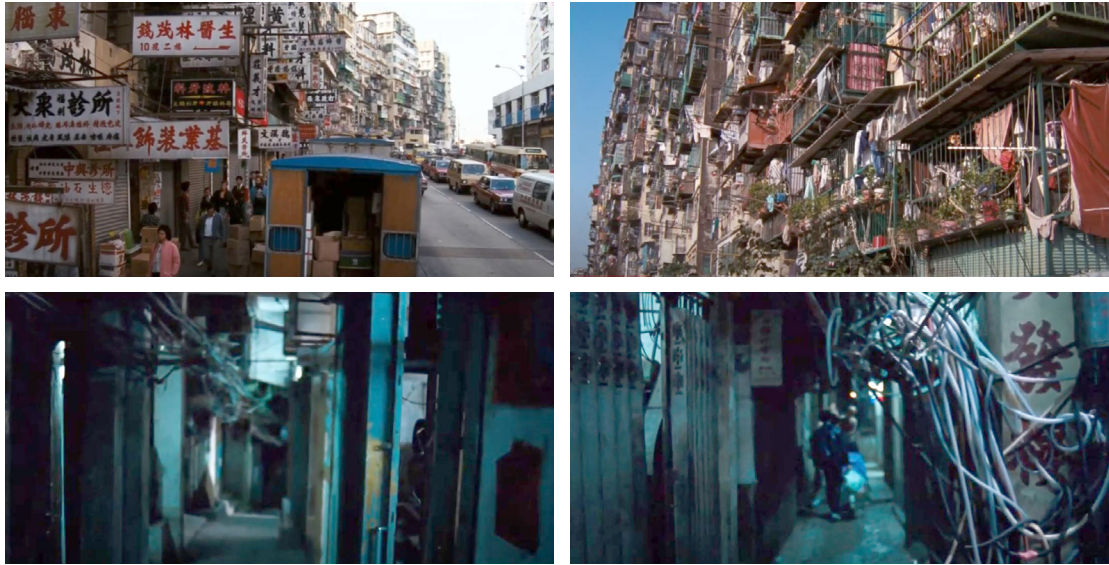


Fig. 232. The Kowloon Walled City, months before its final demolition, in stills from the movie *Bloodsport* (1988).

de una Lobotomía at the University of Alicante develops, with great graphic virtuosity, the history of the citadel and the spatial articulation of a territory whose stigmatised memory was aspired to be erased by the new urban development actions (fig. 231).⁴ The new public park was conceived with the purpose of eradicating the onerous memory of the citadel: the intensive use of *feng-shui* motifs (orientations in relation to the cardinal points, relations between lakes and pavilions, shapes of wall openings) suggests a conscientious purpose of healing the wounds in the collective memory, as well as emphasizing the *Chinese* character of the new neighborhood as opposed to the colonial planning. Only the Tin Hau temple and the Yamen historical pavilion (significantly, the only pre-colonial artifacts in the entire complex) survived after the citadel's demolition. There is also a bronze moment with a scale model of the urban block, presumably based on the architectural diagrams made by Kazumi Terazawa in 1997.

The anime film *Ghost in the Shell* (1989), inspired by Masamune Shirow's *manga* series, has had a major influence on the aestheticization of urban informality within the Asian visual imaginary.⁵ The animated film, despite taking place in Tokyo, adopts as its own the urban landscape and building facades of Hong Kong resulting from the 1956 Ordinance (fig. 233). In a similar way, *Blade Runner* (1982) had appropriated the streets of Hong Kong to set its action in Los Angeles' Chinatown, characterizing it through the intricate and congested spatiality of Asian cities.

These urban landscapes represent futuristic technology, overcrowded conditions and precarious lifestyles that conform to the *high-tech low-life* motto coined by Bruce Sterling in the preface to William Gibson's novel *Burning Chrome*.⁶ In keeping with the perceived unknowable opacity of Asian language and Orientalizing exoticism, we saw the Japanese kanji *gen* ('origin'), identical to the hanzi equiv-

4 Mari Ángeles Peñalver Izaguirre and David Jiménez Iniesta, 'Historia de Una Lobotomía' (Universidad de Alicante, 2014) <<https://archivoproyectosarquitectonicos.ua.es/index.php/30-historia-de-una-lobotomia-jimenez-iniesta-penalver-izaguirre>>.

5 Mamoru Oshii, *Ghost in the Shell* (Japan: Kôdansha, 1996).

6 William Gibson, *Preface, Burning Chrome* (London: Harper Collins, 1995), p. 4.



Fig. 233. Stills from Mamoru Oshi's animated film Ghost in the Shell (Japan: Kôdansha, 1996).

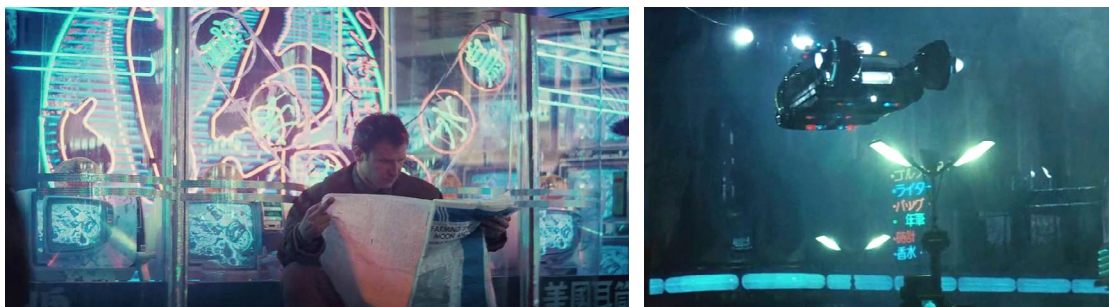


Fig. 234. Stills from Ridley Scott's film Blade Runner (USA: The Ladd Company, 1984).



Fig. 235. Various photographs of actions carried out by Wu Yongning. Source: Instagram, Facebook, Weibo.

alent *yuan* used decontextually in the urban signage of futuristic Chinatown (fig. 234). *Blade Runner* art director Tom Southwell explains that the visual aspect of the ideograms was prioritized over meaning:⁷ since the majority of the audience would be Westerners, it was considered a priority to enrich the visual appeal of the film through flamboyant exoticism, creating myriads of neon signs and luminous displays that did not necessary have to advertise anything.⁸ The commercial street signs deliberately lacked any specific message, creating in the Chinese-speaking audience a vague sense of spatial and temporal dislocation. The orientaling props thus serve to stage a futuristic city that attempts to belong to no time and place, offering instead a collage of architectural forms, fractured social classes, and biomechanical hybrid devices that evolve out of our time and place.

Other visualizations that have served to fuel the citadel's romantic halo include Adolfo Arranz's award-winning infographic for the South China Morning Post⁹ (fig. 236) and the cross-section published in Japan under the title *Exploring Kowloon City*.¹⁰ Since then, countless digital artists have been inspired by the visual exuberance of the Citadel to create fictional universes. There are also commercial galleries such as Warehouse Kawasaki in Japan and Wenheyou in Canton. The irruption of Instagram, as well as the *streaming* video ecosystem of the Chinese internet (Huoshan, Kuaishou) have provoked a flood of aesthetic trends and styles. The *daredevil* trend, originally inspired by the Russians Vitaliy Raskalov and Vadim Makhorov¹¹ found in Chinese metropolises such as Shenzhen, Guangzhou, Chongqing, Shanghai a mean to contribute to the aestheticization of contemporary China; these images served to construct the visual mythology characteristic of a post-reform communist country that lacked 'coolness'. A 'narrative', an 'ethos' and an epic, (the carefree defiance of death) allowed these cities to position themselves by their own appeals in relation to the *skyline* of North American metropolises. The Chinese *daredevils* contributed to these narratives, organically conceived and, therefore, alien to the official discourse until the death of climber, photographer, and model Wu Yongning from the rooftop of the Huayuan International Centre in Changsha, Hunan (fig. 235) in 2017. The tragedy prompted the Chinese government to sharply abort the practices that had flourished on Chinese *streaming* platforms such as iQiyi, Tabao Online or Kuaishou and which were described as 'Wild West' by Party spokespersons before being severely regulated.¹² Other trends of similar impact were the aestheticization of neon signs that will be addressed below and the staging of scenarios evocative of 1980s cyberpunk such as the 'monster building' Yik

7 Charles de Lauzirika, *Dangerous Days: Making Blade Runner* (USA, 2007).

8 Lui.

9 Shirley Zhao, 'Post Wins 28 Global Design Awards; Artist Adolfo Arranz's Work Singled Out', *South China Morning Post*, 2014 <<https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/article/1429895/post-wins-28-global-design-awards-artist-adolfo-arranzs-work-singled>> [accessed 28 April 2021].

10 Kazumi Terazawa, *Dai Zukai Kyuryujo [Ilustraciones Del Gran Castillo de Kowloon]*, ed. by Hiroaki Kani (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1997).

11 Vitaliy Raskalov and Vadim Makhorov, 'On The Roofs', 2020 <<http://ontheroofs.com/>> [accessed 28 April 2021].

12 Tessa Wong, 'Wu Yongning: Who Is to Blame for a Daredevil's Death?', *BBC World*, 2017 <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-42335014>> [accessed 28 April 2021].

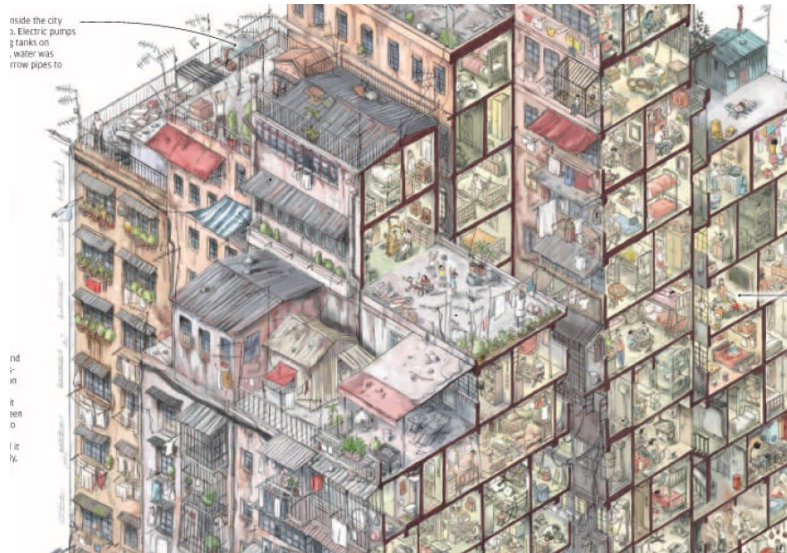


Fig. 236.
Detail of the infographic
*Kowloon Walled City: A Place of
Anarchy*. Adolfo Arrainz, 2014.
Source: South China Morning
Post.

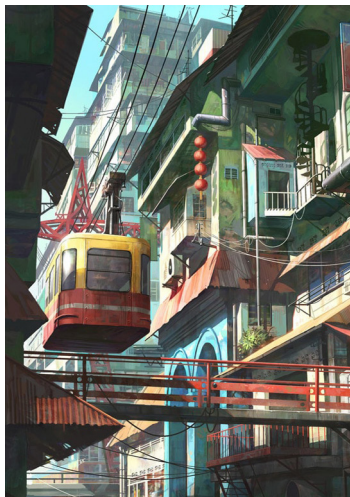
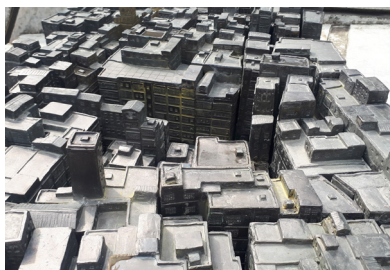


Fig. 237.
Illustrations by Fei Giap Chong.
2014-2021. Source: Fei Giap
Chong/Facebook



(Left) Bronze model of the old Kowloon Walled City in Kowloon City Park,
in front of a mural depicting Terazawa's cross section drawing
of the complex. (Top) Apart from some educational panels,
Kowloon City Park is now a public greenery area designed
under traditional Chinese principles. Source: author, 2019.

Cheong for *Transformers: Age of Extinction* (2014)¹³ or *Doctor Strange* (2016),¹⁴ as well as the public housing complex Choi Hung Estate, today all converted into a destination for tourists and *instagrammers*. Since then, the shabby appearance of verticalized slums have turned a common theme in videogames and other digital cultures; films like *Ready Player One*, (2018) based on the novel by Ernest Cline from 2011, just add to the endless list of dystopian recreations of low-life/high-tech architectures. We may, however, highlight the optimistic, inclusive visual universe of Malaysian artist Fei Giap Chong, who appears to be inspired by Miyazaki's architectural fantasies. His native Penang is reinterpreted offering a multicultural understanding these constructive practices as a constituent element of an urban identity and Malaysian diverse society (fig. 237).¹⁵

13 Michael Bay, *Transformers: Age of Extinction* (Estados Unidos, 2014).

14 Scott Derrickson, *Doctor Strange*, 2016.

15 Fei Giap Chong, 'Running Snail Studio', *Running Snail Studio*, 2020 <<http://www.runningsnailstudio.com/>> [accessed 22 May 2021].



Fig. 238. Plans and interior decoration of Wenheyou Superb, 2020. Source: Leju, Guangzhou.

5.1.3.2 Neon Nostalgia

Thus closing the ‘circle of self-representation’ we come to a youtube video by Chinese influencer Naomi Wu, narrating her visit to the leisure and restaurant centre in Guangzhou *Wenheyou Superb* that recreates Kowloon’s Walled City. It is populated by nostalgic recreations of commercial brands and *vintage* shops recreating the way of life of the eighties in Canton (fig. 238).¹⁶ Built on the commercial podium of a new real estate complex, *Wenheyou Superb* alludes again to the ‘rescue’ of old uses, recalling a sweetened version of the self-built city. It is in ‘the sense of a cross between the Business Centre lifestyle and 1980s nostalgia’ that spaces and objects such as Cantonese snacks are reconstructed.¹⁷

Even its visitor plans seem to be inspired by the architectural elevations of composite buildings or the agglomerations of transit systems and urban infrastructures so characteristic of Asia, as well as the human and semiotic congestion that was popularized by the popular illustrations of Li Han of Atelier 11. We may contrasted it with drawings made by Kroll half a century earlier (fig. 239, 240). The ‘lived space’ that spreads in an open blank while visitors stroll around, is replaced by a another genre of grid, one that results more familiar to those accustome to digital means of space representation. The use of axonometries to represent the three-dimensionality of the internal routes of *Wenheyou Superb*, a visually complex language, responds to a young audience familiar with the reading of complicated diagrams typical of video games. *Wenheyou Superb* is thus a simulacrum of a Walled City of Kowloon (although this name, like that of no other specific location apart from ‘Canton’, is never mentioned) and rescues the identity symbols of the everyday life of the generation of the eighties and nineties, a genuinely ‘Chi-

16 Naomi Wu, “I visit a FAKE Chinese Slum!”, *Youtube*, 2020 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rsPIgtLdqCA&t=16s>> [accessed 27 January 2021]

17 Chen Qi, ‘Páidui Chāo 2500 Zhuō, Tàigǔ Huì + Chāojí Wén Hé Yǒu de Dāpèi “Zhēnxiāng”’, *Leju.Com*, 2020 <<http://news.leju.com/2020-07-13/6688321886428118215.shtml>> [accessed 27 January 2021].



Fig. 239.
Lucien Kroll, *Étude zone sociale Axonométrie*, 1974. Source:
Centre Pompidou.

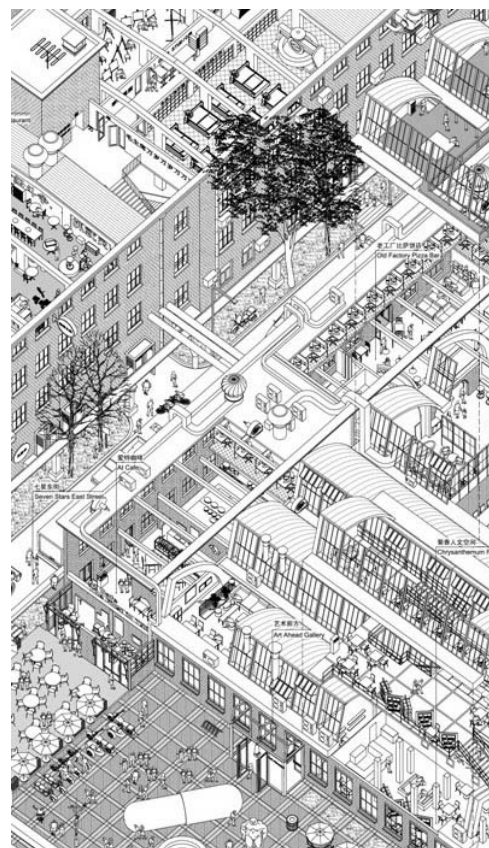


Fig. 240.
Han Li, *798 Art Zone*, 2015. Source: Atelier 11.

nese' slum whose syrupy representation omits the colonial tensions that made it possible and shaped it. In *The Generic City* Koolhaas states that the meaning of the city, its *genious loci* consists in 'identity', in the sense of understanding, being able to read and apprehend a particular set of signs and meanings. We are somehow aware that the concepts and ideas we have at our disposal are insufficient to find the answers, and are in fact part of the problem: 'To the extent that identity is derived from a physical substance, from the historical, from the context, from the real, we somehow cannot imagine anything contemporary contributing to it'. The past will, at some point, become too 'small' to 'be inhabited and shared by all who are alive. [...] Identity conceived as this sharing of the past is a losing form'.¹⁸ In other words: 'In the future there will not be enough past for everyone'.

The demand for consumption by the Chinese middle class is not conditioned by the constrictions of a patrimonial heritage to preserve, nor of a post-colonial identity discourse in relation to which to position itself. The *commodification* of informal spaces (whether through the rehabilitation of existing places or the construction of scenographies from scratch) is assumed as an inevitable drift in the hands of identity celebration and the production of sweetened nostalgia that avoids facing the underlying social conflicts. This process takes place in the Chinese context without any friction, since the Cultural Revolution had broken the continuity of historical traditions. In Thailand, on the other hand, and as presented in *Chang-*

¹⁸ Rem Koolhaas, *The Generic City* (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1998).



Fig. 241.
Cover art of *Neuromancer*
(1984) by William Gibson.
Art by Barclay Shaw. Source:
isfdb.org.



Fig. 242.
Kong Kee, still of the short
animation film *Dragon
Delusion*, (2021).

Chui, this tension between market and spatial production can be seen; the spontaneity and vernacular inventiveness of informal structures must be offered as a qualified object of consumption, aimed at specific market niches, qualifying the experiences of consumption as an intellectualized reworking of the practices and utensils of urban vernacularism.

So-called Asian Futurism is fundamentally rooted in the urban context and its narratives reside in the 'landscape and texture of its cities as much as in the private lives of its protagonists'. For Dawn Chan, the 'racialization' of the futurist imaginary 'exiled' Asian Americans from a present present in which they are not represented to a hypothetical future (fig. 241).¹⁹ As a result of the anxiety that Japan's economic prosperity had provoked in the West during the 1980s, David Morley and Kevin Robins enunciated the theory of 'Techno-Orientalism':²⁰ the exoticization of the Orientalized Other underpinned by the visual imaginary of science fiction. Techno-Orientalism perpetuated a stereotypical genre of representation of Asian cities in which, however, genuine Asian experiences were lacking. City and landscape acted as mere Orientalizing props for the representation of Western narratives.

However, these verticalized and congested cities, constituted in the Eastern Other, have aroused conflicting attitudes on both sides of the Pacific Ocean. Xin Wang

19 Dawn Chan, 'Asian Futurism', *Art Forum*, 2016 <<https://www.artforum.com/print/201606/asia-futurism-60088>> [accessed on 6 April 2022].

20 Dawn Chan.

argued that *Otherness*, in terms of the feeling of marginalization in the face of hegemonic discourses, is not a 'universal experience'. The fundamental shortcoming of this discourse is that it operates from a place of deficiency,²¹ which could be understood as a denial of the centrality of the Asian American experience in the construction of a narrative of Asianness. According to Wang, it would be necessary to stop looking to Hollywood for reference²² since, according to Mimi Wong, the 'divergence between the Asian American minority and the Asian majority' would be irreconcilable²³ as the latter lacks any internalized notion of the colonial experience. It is in this light that Nguyễn Mạnh Hùng's patriotic futures will be understood in their full depth. Beneath the superficial reading of his work as the representation of a Vietnamese modernity that makes up for its technological backwardness by appealing to essential values, seeking the easy contrast between the jet fighter and the hay cart, an autonomous futurible emerges that takes post Đổi Mới Vietnam as a centre of reference in an analogous way to how Liu Cixin had taken China in the 1980s as the germ for a digital participatory democracy.

Neon signs, artifacts designed to arouse desire among consumers, also serve as a metonymy for Hong Kong's original character as an outpost of capitalism on China's doorstep; a haven that could provide a comforting familiarity to Westerners while preserving their 'Oriental experience'. According to architects Max Fung and Ken Mak, Hong Kong, unlike other major capitalist cities, experienced a long period of unregulated signage, making the resulting visual diversity one of the defining characteristics of its cityscape. This ranges 'from Chinese calligraphy to digital display with computer fonts, from handmade materials to fabricated light boxes'.²⁴ The predominant language shifts from street to street, turning urban landscapes into mutating experiences of exoticism and familiarity. This fusion of calligraphy and contemporary visual language, in Shao-Yi Chan's words, 'encapsulated the *zeitgeist* of *zhongxi hebi*', referring to the fusion of Chinese (in this case, Cantonese) and Western elements.²⁵

The 'painless memory, in which history becomes a kind of surface decoration' in effect creates an aesthetic universe,²⁶ a social code, where anxieties about the present can be projected and diluted, creating a sugar-coated version of historical becoming. As Huppertz points out, we see in Alan Chan's illustrations a longing for a pre-war Shanghai imbued with the cosmopolitanism of the colonial concessions and the architectural splendour of the Bund. The brand Shanghai Tang goes further in terms of merging past and future by combining Maoist kitsch with Warhol-like industrial colours and traditional Chinese motifs, using 'mutually conflicting historical narratives for the "armchair nostalgia" enthusiast, creating a Chinese

21 Xin Wang.

22 Referring no doubt to the controversies over *whitewashing* in Asian film characters.

23 Mimi Wong, 'The Aesthetic Project of Remaking "Yellow" Identity', *Asia Art Archive*, 2020.

24 Mak and Fung.

25 Shao-Yi Chan, 'From Neon Signs to Skyscrapers: The Spectacle of Fluidity in Hong Kong's Postmodern Cityscape', *Hong Kong Studies*, 1.2 (2018), 143–59 (p. 36).

26 D J Huppertz, 'Designer Nostalgia in Hong Kong', *Design Issues*, 25.2 (2009), 14–28 (p. 20) <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20627803>>.



Fig. 244. Designer Douglas Young in his installation at the Heritage Museum in Sha Tin, 2017. Source: South China Morning Post



Fig. 243. Mural by Cinta Vidal for the HK Walls Festival in 2018.

historical pastiche invested with the aura of a new tradition'.²⁷ We see in works such as the mural made by Cintia Vital for the 2018 *HK Walls* festival the reclamation of 1960s buildings as an identifying feature of the city, not so different from Filip Dujardin's reverie (fig. 243) but endowed with a nostalgic and mystifying component. In modern Hong Kong it has become popular to rescue neon lighting for new commercial premises. Despite being technologically outdated, neon lighting provide a moody feeling to the interiors of establishments such as the 'Ping Pong Bar' on Hong Kong Island or "Mum's Not Home" and 'Anchoret Café' in Kowloon. 'Mido Café', a restaurant founded in the 1950s and managed by Wong Shing-Fan in Yau Ma Tei in West Kowloon has repeatedly been the subject of interest due to its well-preserved *vintage* ambience.²⁸ Nostalgic films such as *Echoes of the Rainbow* (2010) have also drawn on the urban imagery of an old local sensation, drawing on post-war buildings, neon signs and small family-run street businesses.²⁹ The animated film *Dragon Delusion: The True Colour of Hong Kong* (2018), made by Kong Kee at Penguin Lab (fig. 242), depicts the place as a 'forbidden citadel' somewhere between cyberpunk and retro *vaporwave* adorned with outdated consumer tech items evoke the childhood memories of first-generation Hongkongers who,

27 Huppatz, p. 22.

28 Eduard Fernández, 'Hong Kong's Fight to Save Its Neon Shimmer – a Photo Essay', *The Guardian*, 2018 <<https://www.theguardian.com/travel/2018/jul/25/hong-kong-neon-lighting-threat-chinese-regulations>>; Zabrina Lo, 'Cool Down This Summer with Vintage Drinks from Hong Kong's Bing Sutts', *Zolima City Mag*, 2019 <<https://zolimacitymag.com/cool-down-this-summer-with-vintage-drinks-from-hong-kongs-bing-sutts/>> [accessed 28 April 2021].

29 Alex Law, *Echoes of the Rainbow* (Hong Kong, 2010).



Fig. 245.
Justin Guariglia, *Planet Shanghai*, 2010,
National Geographic. Source: Justin Guariglia.

as Douglas Young points out, have grown up in opulence.³⁰ 'Advertising contains valuations and connotations that go beyond the original meaning of the product or the company', Huppertz points out. 'Thus, there is a meaningful message beyond the merely enunciative performance of street signs, as constructed through the accumulation of symbols and display devices. It is not the sign that seduces, but the resonance of multiple individual actions, an organic agglomeration of competing messages. Likewise, the high concentration of wealth, the number of millionaires and the high rents complicate the relationship between high density and low cost. Rooney stated that to an outsider 'it was fascinating how, despite the limitations of space, such well-dressed people manage to emerge every morning from public housing blocks'.³¹ We may find Bourdieu's principles of taste-making called into question; luxury items are reduced to their minimum expression as a sign of wealth and are unashamedly accompanied by everyday artefacts of the utmost simplicity in a pragmatic search for comfort. We see in the photograph from Justin Guariglia's *Planet Shanghai* series a classic picture of Chinese cities, where walking down the street in pajamas had been considered a sign of status (fig. 242). The display of the Louis Vuitton bag crowns this display of status and, although from the Western point of view of the 'social basis of taste' this person would have been identified as a *poseur* (someone usurping the symbols of a group to which he or she does not belong, since wearing cheap pyjamas in the street is not elegant) from the Chinese point of view this juxtaposition of luxury and comfort makes perfect sense. Regarding the notion of decorum of residential buildings in Hong Kong, this

30 Wolf, Baker, and Young, p. 162.

31 Nuala Rooney, p. 66.



Fig. 246.
Childrens Paradise. Photography
by Fan Ho. Hong Kong, circa
1955. Source: Blue Lotus Gallery.

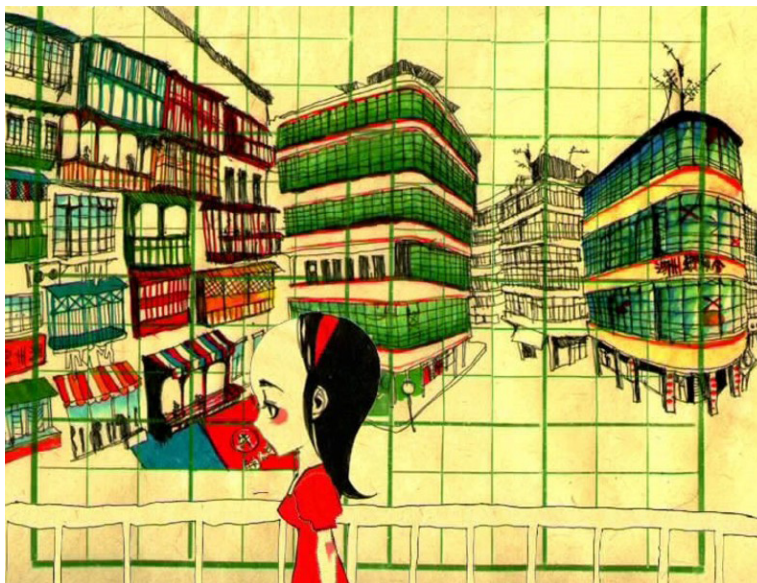


Fig. 247.
Still from the short animation
movie *Very fantastic* by Stella So
(Hong Kong: 2002).

dissociation between comfort and status is crystal clear. Environments and objects are not evaluated by the conjunction of design and functionality; these correspond to separate spheres that receive their own distinct attention. It is probably for this reason that Nuala Rooney concluded in her analysis of the interior design of HKHA housing that 'clearly Hong Kong people's lifestyle, consumption choices, social class and their living standards do not correspond to what would be understood as lower-class families in the West'.³² Women in particular were exposed through the media to ideals of how to create ideal domestic habitats through colourful decorations and how to care for and educate children. Ng notes the emergence in the 1970s of the domestic ideal; its evolution, was accompanied by more self-con-

³² Nuala Rooney, p. 67.

tained and privately directed designs directed towards the nuclear family. Issues such as socio-economic mobility and *distinction through taste*, gender roles and the division of labour, as well as novel cultural practices such as the enjoyment of free time or the assimilation of leisure time as a consumer activity would break into the private homes.³³

However, for the Hong Kong context Nuala Rooney will critically read Bourdieu's most influential book, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*³⁴ on the basis of the very different class conditioning. Bourdieu claimed that the working class, deprived of the goods it needs, adapts, and resigns itself to a taste created out of necessity. They identify as 'class conditions' those qualities that are imbued in *class habitus* classifications. They see themselves as 'simple' and 'modest' people with 'modest' tastes.³⁵ The Hong Kong home, as a place that only the closest family members would come to know, was not generally understood as a place that should reflect the status of the family.³⁶ Thus, Rooney states that 'Western descriptive categories are inadequate to present the density of Hong Kong'.³⁷ We find ourselves in a strange field for Western scales of values, including those built on postmodernity. In the Asian case Bourriaud's now classic categorisations therefore require revision beyond Mark Greif's 2010 update to digital spaces in relation to the American hipster movement.³⁸ As Roodney stated almost twenty years earlier, 'the [sensory and vital] experience of Hong Kong's density reveals its paradoxes and a range of interpretations: it can be positive or negative; liberating or oppressive; exciting or consuetudinary'.³⁹

Mary Chan, founder of the design and architecture publishing house MCCM Creations, cites as an example how the G.O.D. brand managed to create its own imagery of post-war Hong Kong in 'the way Ralph Lauren has done for American culture'.⁴⁰ Drawn in the grids characteristic of Chinese calligraphy teaching notebooks, Stella So's book (fig. 247) consists of fisheye views of various urban scenes in *Hong Rey*. For example, *Tong Lau* houses and compound buildings peppered with all sorts of everyday artefacts such as cages, lamps, bird cages and signs. The scenes in the graphic novel hark back to the imaginary narrator's childhood, revealing the social history told by these spaces that has made his illustrations prominent among local *pop* culture. This represents a sense of nostalgia not only for the modes and artefacts, but for the Agrest's notion of 'semantic volume': a mass of multiple meanings and contradictory signifiers.⁴¹ All stacked against each other in a 'liminal urban space' and linked to small home manufactures before their metamorphosis into a global financial centre.

33 Nuala Rooney, p. 111.

34 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

35 Thế Sơn Nguyễn, 'Nguyễn Thế Sơn', 2019 <<http://nguyentheson.com/>> [accessed 15 August 2019].

36 Nuala Rooney, p. 112.

37 Nuala Rooney, p. 59.

38 Greif.

39 Nuala Rooney, p. 59.

40 Chai Ziwen, *Hong Kong Creative Ecologies: The Shaping of Design Culture*, ed. by Edith Terry (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Design Centre, 2010), p. 134.

41 Agrest.



Fig. 248. Portrait of Elaine Chiu during the elaboration of *Memories Melting*, 2021. Source: Eliane Chiu/Facebook.



Fig. 249. Elaine Chiu, *The Unspoken Words*, 2020, acrylic on canvas, 65.5 × 91 cm, JPS Art Gallery, 2021, Hong Kong. Source: Eliaine Chiu/Facebook.

As a more recent evolution of these forms of nostalgia we have artist Elaine Chiu's exhibition *Before Memories Expire* at the JPS Art Gallery in Hong Kong in May 2021. Her work derives mainly from *urban sketching* sessions (urban scenes in watercolour), a hobby that is popular throughout Asia and has contributed greatly to the appreciation of vernacular historical heritage, with renowned artists such as Ch'ng Kiah Kiean. Among all the works presented in this work, Chiu's is the only one that has been produced after the pro-democracy protests of 2019-2020 with the Public Security Law in place since 2020. It is, therefore, the only one that confronts a censorship that is punishing with unusual harshness any demonstration close to what the new law considers incitement to rebellion. Chiu's drawings take up composite buildings as a central theme, recreating the decrepit but familiar facades and commercial signs of small local businesses, all rendered as if they were eva-

nescent with the same techniques employed in watercolor cityscapes. The sculpture *Memories Melting* (2021) represents the progressive disappearance of this heritage (fig. 248) in a literal sense, establishing a direct connection between the urban renewal operations executed by the URA and the heritage of the Hong Kong *millennial* generation. This loss is added to the disappearance of the space of freedoms and critical thought that the ex-colony had sheltered until the previous year. When Chiu poses next to the sculpture wearing a chemical respirator, an emblem of the protests over the intensive use of tear gas by Hong Kong police.⁴² Under the new laws, the mask is shown here by virtue of its usefulness in executing the model, constituting, for the first time, a protest device, presented under a cover of non-confrontational ambiguity.

42 Simon Parry, 'The Truth about Tear Gas: How Hong Kong Police Violated All Guidelines for the "Non-Lethal Weapon"', *South China Morning Post*, 2019 <<https://www.scmp.com/magazines/post-magazine/long-reads/article/3022942/truth-about-tear-gas-how-hong-kong-police>> [accessed 3 June 2021].

5.2 Remaking the Social Contract

Since these fragments begin as an articulation of different texts belonging to various cultural systems (...) it is possible to begin to interpret them by any of these systems, and not necessarily by design.¹

Informal façade modifications are driven by a precarious but sustained balance between the interventions that are legally allowed and those that are socially permitted. In this chapter we will study the ethical and social valuation of these productions through activism and creative practice. In analyzing the conflicts between the opposing messages, we also discover the granularity of the interest groups: the tacticism of small speculators who capitalize on the imperfections between norm and form. Their allegedly supervening ignorance allow to capitalize on the mismatches between norm and form. The renunciation of the state to implement its own norms in favor of a modulated, intermittent compassion is the underlying tension herein.

The full implementation of the juridical-political levers of a modern state is surreptitiously contained and modulated in accommodation to silent forces. It is not, as Rolnik would affirm,² the absence of a state, but a variable geometry of forces that have not been codified or mapped composing a vast collage of informal practices a sample of the infinite variety of illegal or extra-legal agreements.³

City making takes place in a twilight zone delimited by a tacit social pact. A pact that can never be put in writing by the public authorities because that would carry the recognition of a reality whose very existence is denied. Raquel Rolnik details how, in the 1940s, when the mayor of São Paulo, Prestes Maia, confined prostitution to the Bom Retiro neighbourhood, public power assumed a pragmatic attitude: we cannot eradicate low-level crime and, therefore, we must confine it to a place where it does not threaten the *official* conception of society.⁴

It has been detailed in the second section how the historical evolution of the concept of *informality* had been primarily linked to the classification of labour relations and the boundaries between the absence of typification and the active commission of an infraction can become blurred. We are guided by the conception of the paternalistic state by Kuan-Hsing Chen, according to which, although the social contract is expressed in legalistic terms borrowed from Western rationalism, it resorts in everyday practice to a restrained tolerance.⁵

1 Diana Agrest, 'Design versus Non-Design', in *Architecture from Without. Theoretical Framings for a Critical Practice* (Boston, MA: MIT Press, 1991), p. 56.

2 Raquel Rolnik, *A Cidade e a Lei. Legislação, Política Urbana e Territórios Na Cidade de São Paulo* (São Paulo: Studio Nobel, 1997), p. 40.

3 Alena Ledeneva, *The Global Encyclopaedia of Informality. Volume 1*, ed. by Alena Ledeneva and others (London: UCL Press, 2018); Alena Ledeneva, *The Global Encyclopaedia of Informality. Volume 2*, ed. by Alena Ledeneva and others (London: UCL Press, 2018) .

4 Rolnik.

5 At the end of the chapter we will refer to the latest wave of Thai political repression to explain the multiple acts of censorship and repression, in what Herzberg calls 'crypto-colonial drives'.

5.2.1 The Rattanakosin Charter

The so-called ‘Rattanakosin Charter’ is an ironic term coined by Chatri Prakitnonthakan to denounce the contradictions incurred by the Thai Department of Fine Arts in relation to the preservation of Rattanakosin’s heritage, which are unfounded from the perspective of the international consensus of the Venice Charter.⁶ Prakitnonthakan provides numerous examples of policies of destroying the past and rewriting it for the glorification of the absolute monarchy such as modern interventions on the ‘Monument to the Defence of the Constitution’ in Laksi, north of Bangkok, the Art Deco architecture of Ratchadamuang Avenue and, in general, the vestiges of the heritage of the early Thai constitutional period.⁷ These ‘retrofitting’ interventions, which often amount almost to clandestine demolitions, make perfect sense when understood under the new royalist and ultra-nationalist agenda. The aim, Prakitnonthakan suggests, is to erase the memory of the overthrow of absolutism and rewrite recent history. Prakitnonthakan explains that there is in fact no full independence in the criteria for the conservation of monuments, no effective counterweight against decisions that openly contravene internationally accepted criteria for restoration.

Michael Herzberg, one chronicler of the Pom Mahakan community’s struggle for preservation alongside Prakitnonthakan himself, reflected at the Thai Studies conference of 2017 in Chiang Mai about the elusive condition of ‘crypto-colonialism’ that was generated by the ‘combination of sycophancy and resentment towards powerful Western nations’. Censorship thus becomes a defensive posture, a hidden sense of inferiority and shame about one’s own cultural situation.⁸ Herzberg, quoting political analyst Benjamin Zawacki, detailed the source of resentment among many Thai politicians: the condescending and often insulting instructions given by their American allies. The attitude of paternalistic lecturing to political-military allies as well as to academic or commercial counterparts may have given rise to deep and lasting resentment.

In *The City and the Grassroots* (1984) Castells makes a comparative historical study of different urban social movements, wondering about the causes of their successes and failures.⁹ Castells did not understand the participants in these movements as mere expressions of class, gender or racial conflicts. Rather, they should be characterized as individuals, each with their own particular aspirations, and, thus, it is not feasible to articulate a formula for social movements that claims to be general. Each struggle arises from its own human and situational context and ‘any attempt to present a general formula would fall into metaphysics’. Castells does, however,

6 Chatri Prakitnonthakan, ‘Rattanakosin Charter: The Thai Cultural Charter for Conservation’, *Journal of the Siam Society*, 100 (2012).

7 Chatri Prakitnonthakan, *The Art and Architecture of the People’s Party: Political Symbols in Ideological Aspect* (Bangkok: Matichon, 2009).

8 Michael Herzfeld, ‘Thailand in a Larger Universe: The Lingering Consequences of Crypto-Colonialism’, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 76.4 (2017), 887–906.

9 Manuel Castells, *The City and the Grassroots: A Cross-Cultural Theory of Urban Social Movements* (University of California Press, 1984).

recognize a structural current aimed at the ‘transformation of urban meaning’.¹⁰ These movements, as Peter Hall interprets them,¹¹ arise and fail because of the confluence of wider forces; they cannot in themselves do anything significant: they are doomed to fail and remain ‘Reactive Utopias’.¹² A closer examination of the insurgency of shantytown movements around the world suggests to Castells that most of these cases are examples of urban populism (‘the process of establishing political legitimacy on the basis of mobilisation with the aim of delivering land, housing and public services’) rather than social movements. These forms of urban populism characterise the affiliation of slum dwellers in the Calcutta region, enabling the disadvantaged to access shelter and services through patronage and the purchase of political wills. Access to resources is achieved through the fabric of associations, which also require obedience, dedication and loyalty and can therefore constitute ‘a claustrophobic game’.¹³

We face the difficulty that the subterranean character, the lack of name of spatial productions developed in the shadow zone of discourse, prevents us from listing them as historical landmarks, except for those that occurred when situations of stark inequality and lack of hygiene overflowed in the form of major catastrophes or disorders (the 1904 plague in Hanoi, the 1957 riots in North Point or the Shek Kip Mei fire in Hong Kong in 1954). These emergencies, when they violently confront formal narratives, are the only historical events that can be chronologically and geographically located. This task is particularly arduous in communist regimes because the mere existence of *class conflict* is excluded from the *logos* of the official narrative. In both China and Vietnam where, despite the economic dynamism, the modernity of their cities and the wild ‘mass capitalism’ spread across all layers of society, the official legitimising discourse remains strongly tied to classical Marxist theory, understanding capitalism and private property as a mere circumstantial tool for the achievement of the material welfare goals of socialism and thus remaining strictly subordinate to state directives.¹⁴ This subordination often goes unnoticed by Western observers (we could especially think of the unfolded optimism of *Great Leap Forward* by OMA,¹⁵ which introduced China’s emergence to the Western public) because it is expressed exclusively in Chinese or Vietnamese language, through slogans and communications generated by the single party. To enhance their official character they are deliberately transmitted apart from regular news flows under their own linguistic and visual code. This simplicity in language aims to reach all layers of society, acquiring an imperative and coercive capacity that leaves no room for rhetorical games or self-serving misrepresentations.¹⁶

10 Castells, p. 324.

11 Peter Hall, ‘Review of “The City and the Grassroots: A Cross-Cultural Theory of Urban Social Movements”’, *Environment and Planning B: Planning and Design*, 11 (1984), 349–51 (p. 350).

12 Castells, p. 327.

13 Ananya Roy, ‘Why India Cannot Plan Its Cities: Informality, Insurgence and the Idiom of Urbanization’, *Planning Theory*, 8.1 (2009), 76–87.

14 The Chinese constitutional reform of March 2018 would make this control explicit, as Article 36 of the constitution would be amended to declare the Communist Party’s leadership over the socialist system.

15 *Project on the City I: Great Leap Forward*, ed. by Chuihua Judy Chung and others (Taschen, 2001).

16 The relationship between the Hanoian public and the propaganda of the Communist Party of Vietnam displayed in the form of posters and urban signs has been described by ethnologist Susan Bayly. Bayly, Suan, ‘Beyond ‘Propaganda’: Images and the moral citizen in late-socialist Vietnam,’ *Modern Asian Studies*, 2020,



Fig. 250. Manit Sriwanichpoom, *Pink, White and Blue*, 2005. Source: Rama 9 Art.

The mere existence of social unrest is not contemplated by the official narrative and, consequently, violent conflicts are framed as common crime or, in the most blatant cases, as a more or less punishable error of judgment by the government managers in charge. The Chinese government interpreted the 2019 protests in Hong Kong through the lens of historical materialism; the huge pockets of land available in the former colony's protected spaces had remained unbuilt due to the influence of the former colony's large real estate groups, who wished to keep housing prices exorbitantly high. The political demands of pro-democracy groups (freedom of speech, rule of law, due process) were thus seen as mere disruptions encouraged by foreign powers and fuelled by a struggle for land as an essential mean of production.

This makes a full history of informality in these countries frankly difficult. Consequently, it is through history, through architectural and artistic projects, that we will get a representation of the feedback between norm, design and informality that reflects their mutual dependence and constant rearrangement and renegotiation.

The smile as a weapon of critique and subversion had already been exploited by Chinese cynical realism, with the work of Zhang Xiaogang, Yue Minjun and Fang Lijun being widely recognized by international audiences. Having flourished during the period of relative political and intellectual openness, Yue Minjun's smiles became the first great contemporary Chinese pop icon. As long as the censor's criteria stuck to the literal search for subversive statements,¹⁷ the histrionic and sinister smiles would reveal themselves as an effective tool of social criticism that could evade censorship.¹⁸ Generated at breath-taking speed, Korean, Japanese and

1-70. Suan Bayly, 'Beyond "Propaganda": Images and the Moral Citizen in Late-Socialist Vietnam', *Modern Asian Studies*, 2020, 1-70 (pp. 27-28).

17 P Thornton, 'Framing Dissent in Contemporary China: Irony, Ambiguity, and Metonymy', *The China Quarterly*, 171.161 (2002), 661-681.

18 Chinese censorship and propaganda tightened considerably after Xi Jing Ping came to power in 2012, eliminating all traces of cynicism in creative and audiovisual works and making it impossible to insert messages critical of the system, even cryptically. So-called cynical realism never occurred in Vietnam (except

English terms are borrowed and reconstructed without translation, put into circulation and mutated, acquiring new meanings in a matter of hours. This crucial significance of the exogenous influence of linguistic structure explains why even the most vigilant watchers of 'post-internet' discourse fail to get any idea about cyberspace mediated by languages other than Western ones. Mastering the language was not enough. Speaking the language, even as a native speaker, is not enough to understand *memes* as they become more politically, culturally and linguistically specific. You had to 'speak the *meme*'¹⁹ if you wanted to participate, even if only as a spectator.²⁰ Reciprocally, mastering the deployment of identity symbols becomes a crucial objective of authoritarian regimes.²¹

In the absence of infrastructures for artistic creation, Marc Bollansee claimed that it is precisely in the terrain of ambiguity and implicit meanings that Southeast Asian artists operate most comfortably.²² It is in this context that Prakitnonthakan's acid article in *The Rattanakosin Letter* should be understood. Artistic creation could thus be used as a tactical device to avoid direct confrontation on unequal terrain.²³

in the counterfeit industry according to the works of Nora Taylor). It could be ventured that, having learned from the Chinese experience, the Vietnamese censors opted to nip in the bud any semantic rebelliousness that could, even potentially, question the regime.

19 Xin Wang, 'Asian Futurism and the Non-Other', *E-Flux Journal*, 2017 <<https://www.e-flux.com/journal/81/126662/asian-futurism-and-the-non-other/>> [accessed 21 May 2021].

20 Wang.

21 Christian von Soest and Julia Grauvogel, 'Identity, Procedures and Performance: How Authoritarian Regimes Legitimize Their Rule', *Contemporary Politics*, 23.3 (2017), 287–305.

22 M Bollansee, *Southeast Asian Contemporary Art Now* (Straits Times Press, 2013), p. 14.

23 Anonymous, 'Anti-Royalism in Thailand Since 2006: Ideological Shifts and Resistance', *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 48.3 (2018), 363–94.



Fig. 251.

Nick DeWolf, Wooden houses by the Pom Mahakan wall, 1972, Bangkok. Source: Steve Lundeen and Nick Dewolf archive.

Fig. 252.

Aerial view showing the fortification and buildings between the wall and the canal in the 1930s. Source: National Archives of Thailand via 'Lek Pratai' and 'Return Tai'.

5.2.1.1 Pom Mahakan: Thailand in a Bottle

The *Siege of Spirits* (2016) by anthropologist Michael Herzfeld (b. 1947),²⁴ who for years attended the endless negotiations between the Bangkok Municipal Authority (BMA) and the community of Pom Mahakan residents. Pom Mahakan is one the two surviving ring fortifications that protected Ratthanakhosin Island in its origins. This was a neighborhood of mostly wooden houses that had flourished since the time of Rama IV (b. 1851, d.1868) in the interstitial area between the On An canal and the city walls (fig. 251 , 252). Herzfeld praises the skill with which Mahakan members brought their plight to international organizations and, at a time when they were portrayed by BMA officials as a ghetto with drug problems and broken families, managed to present themselves as a humble but virtuous microcosm of Thailand. The historical and ethnographic value of the community's wooden houses, originally a settlement to house employees of the royal palace from the early days of the Rattanakosin period, enhances their close link to the history of Bangkok and thus of the Kingdom itself.²⁵

Whereas an anthropologist, says Herzberg, would try to extrapolate what was found in a small place to a larger scale, the residents of Pom Mahakan decided to constitute themselves as the 'material image of the national culture, thus representing its claims to representative authenticity'.²⁶ At no time, neither when they invoked the community's original royal privilege at the beginning of the protests, nor when the ostentation of their monarchism was reduced, did they pose any challenge to royal authority.

24 Michael Herzfeld, *Siege of the Spirits* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

25 Herzfeld, *Siege of the Spirits*.p. 86.

26 Herzfeld, *Siege of the Spirits*.p. 41.



Fig. 253. Images of the Pom Mahakan community's reinvidication activities. Events with academics, press and tourists, Lekai theater in 2015. Bottom left, plan proposed by the BMA. Sources: Francisco Garcia Moro and press clippings from Matichon and habitants.org.

This reworking of hegemonic narratives leads to 'hidden narratives' using ambiguity, cryptic metaphor, seeking the complicity of hierarchical levels above those with whom one is in conflict, and constitutes 'the silent companion of public resistance'. It is necessary to construct 'evocative narratives' aimed at generating interpretations beyond the literality of the work for whose reading it is necessary to know the appropriate codes.²⁷

Most of Pom Mahakan residents did not have title to property and claiming vested rights in the courts was never a realistic option. Their strategy was, according to Herzberg, very different. The nimble management of a rhetoric carving out a civic and cultural identity, with its quiet invocation of a political order antecedent to the Thai nation-state. In this way, the public attacks they suffered would be seen as attacks on the 'traditional core of *Thainess*'.²⁸ Pom Mahakan's neighbours aspired to represent their community as a small-scale map of the national entity: Buddhists, Muslims, soldiers, police, peasants, migrants from the north, south and west of the country together in one community.²⁹

Several generations of traditional Likay theatre performers, an activity protected by the Department of Fine Arts, had resided in Pom Mahakan. A future 'Likay Museum' was thus proposed where this traditional dance performance would be presented.³⁰ The initiative was approved and, thus, reporter Monruedee Jansuttipan details the new series of cultural events (fig. 253) coordinated with the festival calendar of nearby temples, especially the annual Wat Sisaket ('Golden Mountain Temple', see fig. 80) and Loy Krathong festivals, as well as a ceremony of recog-

27 James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcript* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

28 Herzfeld, *Siege of the Spirits*.p. 18.

29 Herzfeld, *Siege of the Spirits*.p. 41.

30 Ariya Aruninta, 'Rehabilitative Landscape in the Old Communities in Bangkok, Thailand', in *The 2009 Incheon IFLA APR Congress* (Incheon, 2009).

dition of ancestors residing in the fortress area to be called 'Whai Por Poo Pom Mahakan' to be held immediately after the Thai New Year.³¹

These events thus served to enhance both the tangible and intangible heritage value of the community and also corroborated the concerns of Praktiknonthakan in 2006 and Herzfeld in 2009 that the proposed park in the area would become a dreary piece of land. In both Herzberg's chronicle and Chatri Praktiknonthakan's work, the mutated interdependence between formal and informal economies is framed within the self-sacrificing servitude of the community's humble inhabitants to the Crown. Drug use and trafficking, serving both the Western backpackers of Khao San Road and the indigenous underworld of Bangkok's old city, is obviated by official planning. An absence of statements questioning the legitimacy of the crown or lacerating social inequality, always framing the conflict as posed by 'Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition'.

31 Monrueedee Jansuttiapan, 'Green Space vs. Community: The Future of Mahakan Fort', *BK Asia City*, 2016 <<https://bk.asia-city.com/city-living/news/future-mahakan-fort-green-space-community>> [accessed 28 April 2021].



Fig. 254. Manit Sriwanichpoom, *This bloodless war 2*, 1997, 50 x 60 cm. Source: Rama 9 Art.

5.2.1.2 Pink Man and the Phantom Tower

Manit Sriwanichpoom (b. 1961) is a Thai photographer, artist and art historian. His career has been marked by acid social criticism in the context of the economic and social crisis of the late 1990s. The street approach of the fifth edition of the *Cities on the Move* festival would provide an *on-site* framework for Sriwanichpoom's parodies of consumer society, urban speculation and the Thai patronage society. The 1990s witnessed the emergence of the new middle class which had not only constituted itself as a consumer force but also as a new political actor. The 1992 protests against General Chatichai Choonhavan were led by what would be called the 'middle class mob',³² as opposed to earlier Marxist movements. The outbreak of the crisis and the stock market crash of 1997 gave rise to 'vibrations of fear and unease spreading through the people'; given Thailand's history of military coups and dictatorships, there was a sense that 'the worst was yet to come'.³³ The intervention of the International Monetary Fund left a bitter sense of foreign interference and unease towards the ruling class itself. The burst of the speculative bubble left a great variety of pompous architectures. A multitude of similar projects would follow, many by Torsuwan himself and of enormous dimensions such as the Lebua Tower or the Royal Plaza which, under the ideological cover of American postmodernism, developed classicist motifs to the point of paroxysm.³⁴

32 Surin Maisirikrod, 'Thailand 1992: Repression and Return of Democracy', *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 1993, 327-49 (p. 333).

33 Steven Pettifor, *Flavours. Thai Contemporary Art*, ed. by Thavibu Gallery (Abebooks, 2003), p. 54.

34 It gave rise to the aforementioned 'post-modernization of Thainess' as Kasian Tejapira would describe it.

This Bloodless War 2 (1997) by Sriwanichpoom is based on the famous photograph taken by Huỳnh Công Út of an American napalm bombing in 1972 (fig. 254). The concrete structures in the background correspond to the unfinished viaduct for the rail link between central Bangkok and the airport, a thirty-two billion dollar project pushed by Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun in 1992 and abandoned in 1998 amid corruption scandals.³⁵ The project was dubbed the ‘Hopewell case’ after the name of the Hong Kong construction company involved, although it is also known as the ‘Thai Stonehead’ because of the rotundity of the structures that stand unfinished to this day in the north of the capital. Hopewell became a gory reminder of the unbridled greed and waste and broken dreams that accompanied the economic crisis. The place of the South Vietnamese girl Phan Thị Kim Phúc is taken by a model who flees in dismay as her personal universe of status and sophistication collapses; the ‘men in black’ of the IMF walk unperturbed behind her back. Manit’s photographs were originally exhibited as large prints on a central Bangkok roadside, directed to the same population portrayed as a victim of consumerism and the ‘murderous power of financial corporations’.³⁶ The suffering of the *nouveau riche*, vanity and the desire for easy enrichment are parodied. In contrast to the nationalist reaction to the IMF intervention, already addressed in the light of Kasian Tejapira’s writings (p. 222-223) Sriwanichpoom poses a retrospective critique of one’s own mistakes. The use of Vietnam War imagery responds to the interpretation of the crisis as a foreign attack and speculative aggression against the nation:³⁷ a discourse promoted precisely by those who had most encouraged the irrational exuberance of the stock market and national debt: ‘it is easy to blame the West, but it is the whole system that has failed. Greed has buried us’.³⁸

The vast array of modern ruins generated by the economic crisis is reflected in *Dream Interruptus* (2000), a collection of architectural studies of Bangkok’s urban landscape (fig. 255). They are conceived as ‘tombstones in a postmodern cemetery’ where dreams of easy enrichment lie buried.³⁹ The dream of ‘turning the nation into a NIC (‘Newly Industrialised Country’) not through hard work and democratic development but through real estate and stock market speculation’ is criticised: ‘money comes from nothing, returns to nothing. There is not even enough left to finish the skyscrapers’.⁴⁰ Bangkok is thus turned into a gigantic cemetery, full of tombstones of half-finished buildings that, Sriwanichpoom continues, ‘disappear in their own shadow. Empty skeletons and ruins of a global economic war’.

Tejapira, Kasian, ‘The post-modernization of Thainess’, in *House of Glass: Culture, Modernity, and the State in Southeast Asia* (Institute of South East Asian Studies, 2001), pp. 150-70.

35 ‘Reviving the Former Hopewell Route - Translated and Summarized by Wisarut Bholsithi from Prachachart Thurakij, March 4-7, 2004’, *Web Archive*, 2009 <<https://web.archive.org/web/20090202012346/http://2bangkok.com/2bangkok/MassTransit/hopelate.shtml#15>> [accessed 2 May 2021].

36 Brian Curtin, *Essential Desires: Contemporary Art in Thailand* (London: Reaktion Books, 2021), p. 27.

37 George Soros’ speculative attacks are especially memorable. Jonathan E Leightner, ‘Thailand’s Financial Crisis: Its Causes, Consequences, and Implications’, *Journal of Economic Issues*, 41.1 (2007), 61–76 (p. 66).

38 Pettifor, p. 64.

39 Pettifor, p. 85.

40 Pettifor, p. 62.



Fig. 255. Manit Sriwanichpoom, *Dream Interruptus*, 2000. Source: Rama 9 Art.

However, Sriwanichpoom is especially known for the character of *Pink Man*, played by poet Sompong Thawee. Pink Man caricatures Thai patronage society based on a middle-class obsessed by the accumulation of status and social capital: *Pink Man Golfer*, *Pink Man Socialist*, *Pink Man the Siamese Intellectual* (fig. 17 in pag. 17). *Pink Man* paraded silently through the city mocking the tourist slogans of government campaigns such as 'Amazing Thailand', which was sarcastically re-appropriated by the Thai public. It denounced the practice of 'blaming the collapse of society on foreign forces, and then hypocritically calling for the arrival of millions of tourists using the weakness of the baht as a lure'.⁴¹

Documentary photographs of the severe floods of 2011 by Lek Kiatsirikajorn (1979), deepen this skepticism towards the costs of Thailand's economic and social progress. The overflow of the Chao Phraya River caused more than forty-six billion dollars in damage⁴² and flooded the industrial regions north and east of Bangkok, where there are a large number of Korean and Japanese factories. The series entitled *Flowing Through The Wreckage of Dispair* in 2011 portrays the helplessness of the individual in the face of urban development that is reduced to useless carcasses subject only to its own speculative logic. His photographs, such as *Tongleang Keawsai From Yasothon Province*, *Pine Hurst Golf and Country Club Rangsit Prathumthani* (2011) and *Two Men Are Checking Their Net By A Petrol Station Nakornluang Ayutthaya* (2011) take on their full meaning when one attends to the role of water in the conception of Thai urbanity (fig. 257). The 'Divine and Aquatic City' as Teeraviriyakul had christened it is given a bitter counterpoint in these photographs. For Thais, who are inculcated from childhood that floating markets are a symbol of their collective essence,⁴³ this connection is immediate and evident, creating a profound sense of national shipwreck. Modern progress and the civilization of the automobile are swamped by a territory where the natural water drainage routes have been blocked, where speculation has blinded the general interest and which has forgotten to coexist with a variable geography that only obeys its own natural laws.

41 The sarcastic use of Thai tourism campaign slogans such as 'This is Thailand' or 'Amazing Thailand' is reminiscent of the Spanish 'Spain is Different'. The use of English adds intensity to the mockery by pretending to pass off, in the eyes of ill-informed foreigners, endemic corruption and incompetence as folkloric identity traits.

42 According to data from the World Bank report "The World Bank Supports Thailand's Post-Floods Recovery Effort" of 13 December 2011.

43 Remember the painting of the 'Floating Market School' and Neotraditionalism.



Fig. 256. Flood at the Democracy Monument (1940) at Ratchadamueang Avenue in Bangkok, 1942. Source: National Archive of Thailand.



Fig. 257. Lek Kiatsirikajorn, *Two Men Are Checking Their Net By A Petrol Station Nakornluang*, 2011 Ayutthaya, 2011, de la serie *Flowing Through The Wreckage of Despair*. Source: Khatmandu Photo Gallery.



Fig. 258. Illegal apartment extensions in Khu tập thể Thanh Xuân Bắc, Hanoi. Source: author, 2019

5.2.2 ‘Muddling Through’ as a Strategy

The politic scientist Charles Lindblom coined the expression *muddling through* to refer to the approximate reiteration of palliative actions to solve a given problem, performing ‘a task in any way without the knowledge to do so’.¹ According to a technocratic conception, such a problem should be addressed through preliminary analysis by one or more experts who would then propose measures to be implemented. However, Lindblom argued that, in real life, state action is subject to a myriad of constraints such as conflicts of interest, legislative delays, ideological debates, data gaps or inadequacies in the bureaucratic apparatus; it will also face complex problems where circumstances evolve too quickly to be assessed by the bureaucratic apparatus. Therefore, it is often ineffective to entrust public policies to a linear sequence based on the analysis of a problem, the elaboration of a diagnosis, the presentation of solutions and, finally, implementation and monitoring. The approach of ‘getting through somehow’ thus lacks a general plan of action and may even lack a comprehensive modelling of the problem in question; we will thus see a succession of easily executable palliative actions that are intended to channel it, reducing its intensity or, at least, preventing it from spreading or intensifying. It is thus hoped that the problem will be extinguished like a fire that has been enclosed by a firebreak or that, over time, the necessary experience and capacity will be generated to put an end to it expeditiously. It has been detailed how Hong Kong informality scholar Alan Smart described the government’s strategy towards illegal building works as ‘muddling through’ approach that was sustained in time (pag. 189). It has also been detailed how such approach turned successful not only

1 ‘Cambridge Dictionary’, 2020 <<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/>>; Charles E. Lindblom, ‘The Science of “Muddling Through”’, *Public Administration Review*, 19.2 (1959), 79–88 <<https://faculty.washington.edu/mccurdy/SciencePolicy/Lindblom Muddling Through.pdf>>.

in clearing illegal structures from walls (although not from rooftops) but in avoiding direct confrontation with the large segments of the population that adhered to these practices.

This decoupling between plan and strategy is even more interesting in communist regimes, where technocratic planning is a pillar of the legitimacy of the system. While the Party is in charge of watching over the correct development of socialism, technocracy provides the adequate, practical means for it. On the other hand, technocrats are supposed to not be capable to guide the country entirely by themselves, since they would put particular interests above the common good. Both technocrats and party officials stand as mutually dependant in order to guide public policies within the path of socialism.

We may refer to the case of the emergence of informal urban villages in China that took place during the early years of its economic liberalization. The case of Shenzhen, although quite distant from the issues facing by the Hanoi socialist housing blocks, is clarifying for the amount and quality of scholarly that has produced during the last twenty years, as well as the intensity and fluency of the exchange of knowledge between the Chinese and the Anglo-speaking spheres, which has been decisively facilitated by the ongoing series of successful Biennales of Architecture and Urbanism. Born as rural settlements that got absorbed by the rapid urban growth of China's cities, the urban villages become a sort of no-one's land, neighborhoods subject to a legal regime different to the new Special Economic Zones where they stood, serving as low-cost residential areas for the workers of the factories around. The rural land was subject to private ownership and belonged to each of the villages through the Neighbourhood Committees.² Once the cooperatives were converted into holding companies, the farmers became shareholders in charge of all the services, infrastructures and facilities, as well as arbitration in non-criminal conflicts. All this was always supervised by a member of the Communist Party who sat on the board of directors. The administrative hierarchy was structured as follows: at the top was the municipal government, then there was the district government, the local office, the holding company for each village, and finally the community committees, residents' committees, and community working groups, each focusing on a specific aspect of village governance. The rise of these singular enclaves provide and insightful case of the governance of socialist systems where informality stands as too visible and vital to the functioning of society to be neither ignored or wiped out by the execution of law.

Pu Hao conducted a comprehensive study on Shenzhen's urban villages in 2015 in *Spatial Evolution of Urban Villages in Shenzhen*, arguing that their transformations and physiognomy are a consequence of the development of the formal city³ even though their development was unplanned and unregulated.⁴ It is for this reason

2 Sonia Schoon, 'Niche Authority in Urbanized Villages: Bottom-up Codetermination in Megacity Developments in China', in *Transforming Asian Cities: Intellectual Impasse, Asianizing Space, and Emerging Translocalities*, ed. by Nihal Perera and Wing-Shing Tang (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 222–42.

3 Pu Hao, 'Spatial Evolution of Urban Villages in Shenzhen' (Utrecht University, 2012), p. 5.

4 Pu Hao, 'The Effects of Residential Patterns and Chengzhongcun Housing on Segregation in Shenzhen',

that urban villages share the characteristics of informal settlements in other less developed countries: their densification is sustained by rural-urban migration. However, against the notion that informal settlements are the failure to provide housing for village arrivals, Pu Hao claims that this architecture is, in fact, the result of a long series of implicit compromises between government and migrants, where these enclaves were *de facto* recognized because of their importance to the metropolitan economy as they provided housing and services for the industry for which the state would have been able to provide.

Pu Hao detailed two forms of government action during the 1980s, in the early era of economic reforms. The first was to simply 'clean up and deport', expelling all rural migrants and forcing the return of indigenous inhabitants to their original dwellings.⁵ A return to the initial *status quo* was thus imposed, but this policy was considered too inhumane and ineffective to meet the challenge of accommodating the millions of rural migrants moving to the cities and demanded by the productive system. The second method was 'destroy and rebuild'. Urban villages were considered urban reform areas to be gradually rehabilitated. This required recognizing indigenous villagers as urban citizens by providing them with a *hukou*. Under these new conditions, in addition to being able to access basic services, if they were evicted for new developments they could be rehoused in apartments in the new developments, becoming participants in economic growth.

Village governance was not simply a matter of *top-down* relations between an authoritarian state and a subordinate citizenry. The state was often unable to deploy its full theoretical capacity for coercion and had to embark on a process of negotiation with local leaders, although it should never lose its formal position of primacy as the paternalistic conductor of the process. The multiple intersecting interests that gripped the rehabilitation of each village could not simply be ignored by the government unless it wanted to undermine its own legitimacy and its self-declared duty to 'protect the masses of the poor and maintain a harmonious society'.⁶ This was impossible, at least in those settlements that were more 'visible' or more interconnected with the economy and daily life of the city, and therefore could not be evicted by brutal displays of force as was the case in less exposed locations. In line with the goals set by the Communist Party and Deng Xiaoping's aspiration for a middle class with 'modest wealth', the Chinese government's response would be experimental urban governance. A particularly daring but necessary attitude in the face of unprecedented human phenomena subject to high uncertainty. Complex processes of rebalancing, negotiation and *rapprochement* were set in motion with no certain end.

Eurasian Geography and Economics, 56.3 (2015), 308–30 (p. 3).

5 For rural-urban migrants, land occupation was not a viable option for housing because, unlike in many other countries, peri-urban land in China is totally inaccessible and the authorities have zero tolerance for such informal settlements.

6 Schoon, p. 224.

For Schoon the creation of the holding companies to govern the villages had been 'a mere reaction that always lags behind events'.⁷ The aim was now to pilot their integration as 'communities' embedded in the conventional urban fabric. The strategy adopted, the *Youdian Daomian* ('from the point to the surface') would prove very effective in the scale and nature of problems that had never before been faced by any human society and harks back to the spirit of Lindblom's *muddling through* politics. Decentralised reforms and small-scale localised experiments were, if successful, replicated in other parts of the country, only then to be theorised and structured into programmes of action. For example, the successful rehabilitation of the villages of Liede in nearby Guangzhou, as well as Yunong and Gangxia in Shenzhen, served as a pioneering model for other less developed regions of the country.

Decision-making and negotiation processes were thus characterized by a certain level of freedom within an authoritarian framework, although ultimately no group involved will have independent executive authority. The networks of contacts and personal influence known as *Guanxi* constituted a parallel, invisible and amorphous government superimposed on formal institutions; thanks to *guanxi*, the absence of legal certainty, due both to legislative and administrative deficiencies and to corruption and arbitrariness in the administration of justice, was made up for by mutual trust based on reciprocal recognition of personal prestige.

Urban informality in China cannot therefore be understood simply as the absence of planning, but as a mixture of formal and informal elements where the planned and the unplanned, the totalitarian state and free will, the planned economy and the market coexist in mutual dependence. Under the umbrella of *guanxi*, by accepting an agreement all parties have protected their symbolic capital, 'saving face' and reinforced the legitimacy of the socialist state which, although it can be tolerant and understanding, can never be questioned. However, these compromises often remain a mere staging in which the verbalization of the underlying conflicts is omitted. Abuses, extortion, blackmail and conflicts of interest have been common currency in the processes of urban transformation since the reforms. Although with the improvement of digital means of censorship it is increasingly difficult to access this information, it is still known that riots and real peasant revolts are frequent mainly in remote areas and are often mainly motivated by urban planning disputes.⁸ Especially in peri-urban areas where agricultural land is expropriated for real estate development. Only when the attitude of the local institutions was particularly scandalous and had been reported in the national media, thus threatening their own legitimacy, would the higher authorities agree to purge the politicians responsible. Only in developed areas will conflicts have a chance of being brought to court.

Back to the case of Hanoi, we may observe a decades-long evolution of the strategies implemented in order to deal with the informal modification of façades and

7 Schoon, p. 229.

8 Christian Glöbel and Lynette Ong, *Social Unrest in China* (London, 2012), p. 37.

shared spaces. From the time the first socialist collective dwellings were occupied in the summer of 1963 it was clear they would not be inhabited in the way they were conceived. Although the inhabitants were perfectly accustomed to sharing living quarters among several families, whether in 'tube houses' or in collectivized colonial houses, their relocation to an unfamiliar environment such as an apartment building, where all the rules of coexistence had to be rewritten anew, created multiple conflicts of adaptation. The most pressing problems in the new apartments were, however, the drying of the laundry, the occupation of the corridors and, above all, the use of the kitchens. Drummond and Nguyễn detail how *Thủ Đô Hà Nội*, as early as 1963, questioned the suitability of these new housing for the lifestyles of the new inhabitants. The use of the access corridors to the apartments as mere thoroughfares conflicted with the population's modes of spatial use. These spaces were blocked by the installation of clotheslines, makeshift kitchens with no drainage or smoke evacuation routes and cages for breeding animals, chickens or even pigs. The drains had problems disposing of the 'fish scales and vegetable scraps' generated by traditional cooking, which, if prepared in the field, would simply have been dumped into a nearby waterway. It could be said that, in a way, farm life had moved into the new housing blocks and was trying to get rid of the spatial restrictions of modern life.⁹

In the 'Vietnamese spirit', kitchens, toilets and bathrooms are outside the dwelling. In the rural world this situation was easily solved by constructing outbuildings, keeping fumes, smells and humidity away from the main spaces, allowing the use of waste for agricultural manure and solving poor sanitary conditions. The change was especially hard for housewives because of the spatial complexity of household chores, especially cooking. Due to shortages, the household tools with which the houses were equipped were not cost-saving. A typical example was energy consumption, as the occupants did not use the electricity supply due to both the continuous restrictions and the high cost. In addition, the kitchens in the apartments were modified to reinstall equipment more in keeping with local customs.

By the 1970s, the progressive occupation of the open spaces between the blocks with sheds housing chicken coops, vegetable gardens and even houses had already begun. Those who had received apartments on the ground floor had the opportunity to occupy the adjoining area of the street. As mentioned, the initial tolerance of the authorities encouraged squatting competition, whereby each neighbour had to claim his piece of space so as not to be blocked by other people's buildings. 'The splendid KTT have received the colours of the countryside with fruit and vegetable gardens, chicken farms and chaotic buildings spontaneously constructed from waste' the newspaper *Hà Nội Mới* would proclaim very graphically in 1975, as reported by Drummond and Nguyễn.¹⁰

9 Even today, in modern contemporary KBDTM blocks, neighbours continue to install kitchens in the corridors leading to the apartments, which is absolutely illegal according not only to urban by-laws but also to the rules of the co-owners' boards.

10 Lisa Drummond and Thanh Binh Nguyen, 'The Rise and Fall of Collective Housing: Hanoi between Vision and Decision', in *Socialist and Post-Socialist Urbanisms: Critical Reflections from a Global Perspective*, ed. by Lisa B.W. Drummond and Douglas Young (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), p. 76.



Fig. 259. Illegal apartment extensions in KTT Quỳnh Mai, Hanoi. Source: author, 2019.

The early attempt to end street encroachments in 1975 by the Nguyễn Công Trứ Neighbourhood Board was an example of conflict resolution understood as a tactical compromise between informality and a state that, although plenipotentiary in theory, was subject to countless practical shortcomings. The Board's primary motivation was not so much to effectively end these illegal practices, but to make the neighbourhood aesthetically appropriate for Independence Day celebrations on 2 September under threat of forced clean-up by higher authorities.¹¹ It was therefore paramount to avoid a direct challenge to political power in its days of greatest patriotic exaltation; understanding this, residents and Neighbourhood Board, having been mired for years in endless administrative skirmishes, meekly accepted to remove the structures that were, for their part, sheds of very little value and easily replaceable.

The 'Tiger Cages' phenomenon worsened during the 1980s. The economic hardship of the early 1980s led to the emergence of illegal markets in the downtown areas to acquire contraband goods; buildings on the ground floor were particularly suitable to cover the logistics of these informal markets. From Đổi Mới's reforms onwards these occupations would continue to flourish although for different reasons, as they were now vehicles for the expansion of new economic activities and expressions of the new but frenetic grassroots and petit-bourgeois capitalism that thrived throughout the nation. Again the daily *Hà Nội Mới*, as early as 1989, recounted the 'real war' over the occupation of the common spaces of Nguyễn Công Trứ and point to the seemingly paradoxical fact that the greater the level of mod-

¹¹ Drumond and Nguyen, p. 77.

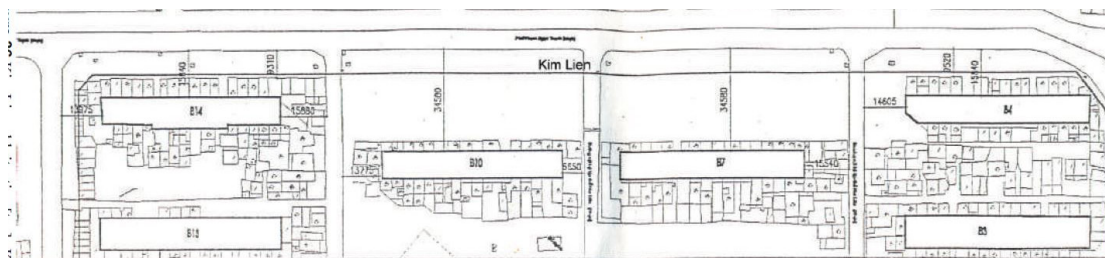


Fig. 260.

State of Kim Lien in the late 1990s, prepared in 2001 by the state-owned construction company Công Ty Cổ Phần Thiết Kế Và Tư Vấn Xây Dựng and collected by Stephanie Geertman in "The self-organizing city in Vietnam; processes of change and transformation in housing in Hanoi" (Technische Universiteit Eindhoven, 2007), p. 254.



Fig. 261.

Self-construction of illegal structures in the open spaces of a rationalist housing complex. Screenshots from the documentary by Nelobo Architects. 'Lines of Flight 0.1/ KTT Kim Lien (1999-2000)', 2009.

ification of the apartment blocks, the more difficult it was for the *phường* authorities to intervene in a forceful manner. Imposing and enforcing demolition orders was not only administratively impossible because of the tangle of landlords and tenancy and sublet agreements, but because it compromised the state's image of efficiency. One can see in the proliferation of Tiger Cages an example of what Garrett Hardin called the "Tragedy of the Commoner" whereby the disorganized disposition of freely available resources by informal actors in pursuit of their individual benefit caused damage to the collective.¹²

During the period immediately preceding the *Đổi Mới* the official reaction would acquire a didactic rather than a punitive intention. The urban clean-up campaign '*Gọn Nhà - Sạch Phố - Đẹp Thủ Đô*' ('Neat Houses, Clean Streets, Beautiful City') of 1983 was part of a programme initiated in 1978 that had among its objectives to clean and clear traffic from the sidewalks. However, the supremacy of the bureaucratic apparatus of the administration was not enough to solve the problems; personal interests, social ties and compassion for those who depended on sidewalk occupations for survival, especially rural immigrants who had become street vendors in order to survive and who had to quickly become familiar with the political nooks and crannies of *phường* governance, came into play in the implementation of the street cleaning campaigns. Given the widespread acceptance of a trade-off between political stability and the adequacy of public space, the state enjoys a margin for arbitrariness to cushion the social impact of its policies. The urban ordinance becomes a test bed for new measures and, in the long run, facilitating the

12 Garrett Hardin, 'The Tragedy of the Commons', *Science*, 1968, 1243-48.



Fig. 262. Illegal apartment extensions in Thanh Xuân Bắc, Hanoi, 2019. Source: author, 2019.

survival of the system by compensating for the rigidity of its bureaucratic apparatus.

As David Koh details in 'Wards of Hanoi', *phường* officials were theoretically empowered to mediate negotiations between public and domestic spaces, mediating the variety of unpredictable details that would result from the implementation of the rules. In Nguyễn Công Trứ, for example, between 1975 and the mid-1980s the interstitial spaces between apartment blocks were slowly filled by informal structures. These occupations were first made of bamboo and, once the level of strength of the *phường* and higher levels of governance had been tested, the buildings were consolidated in durable materials and further land occupations were discreetly initiated. Illegal structures (fig. 262) such as sheds, chicken cages, kitchens, grills, motorcycle parking lots and spare parts depots, or even warehouses and light manufacturing occupied these spaces that were colloquially called *xây chen* ('interstitial buildings').¹³

Logan drew an analogy between power-imposed planning norms and their contestation by the indigenous population, as well as 'neo-colonial' situations whereby more advanced nations use cultural programmes linked to geo-strategic agendas to reinforce their political and economic dominance over other nations. Thus, the acceptance of Soviet advisors, although officially presented as a disinterested collaboration between equals, did imply certain forms of subordination and consequent surreptitious reaction. According to Logan, projects 'were politely accepted

13 David Koh, *Wards of Hanoi* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2006), p. 223.



Fig. 264. Early examples of illegal housing extensions in rationalist buildings (1999), made of bamboo mats and tin sheets. Screenshots from the documentary by Nelobo Architects. 'Lines of Flight 0.1/ KTT Kim Liên (1999-2000)', 2009.



Fig. 263. Cross-section of the occupation of interstitial spaces in Hanoi's socialist housing blocks, taken from Phuong, Dinh Quoc, "(Re)developing old apartment blocks in Hanoi: government vision, local resistance and spatial routines", *Journal of Asian Architecture and Building Engineering*, 18 (2019), 311-23 (p. 315)

on the drawing board' only to be subject to modifications introduced nocturnally during the process of execution. However, the Moscow-educated architect Hoàng Đạo Kính (b. 1941) (later appointed director of the Hanoi Heritage Institute) claimed in an interview with Logan in 1995 that Vietnamese architects did not resent the activity of their Soviet colleagues, but perceived it as a quiet influence rather than an imposition.¹⁴

Khrushchev's housing programme depended on didactic work as intense as construction. People needed to be taught how to inhabit and enjoy the new consumer goods, showing that, in modern socialism, 'mass consumption and images were not the monopoly of the West'.¹⁵ The aim according to Reid was to redirect trends in personal taste and 'delegitimize traditional decorative practices'.

Miriam Dobson argues that the Soviet single party did not necessarily conceive of the individual apartment as a private space.¹⁶ Families, once settled in their own apartments, reacted in a 'selective' way to the instructions given to them either by the technical manager of the buildings. For example, even if stylistic uniformity in decoration was promoted, people would mix new and old furniture, both as a matter of scarcity and sentimentality. Moreover, in community meetings and in publicly written letters and complaints, Dobson finds that residents did not hesitate

14 From his youth, Hoàng Đạo Kính had inherited his father's anti-French activism, displayed by his writings praising the military heroes of the anti-colonial war.

15 Susan E. Reid, 'Cold War Binaries and the Culture of Consumption in the Late Soviet Home', *Journal of Historical Research in Marketing*, 8.1 (2016), 17-43 (p. 268).

16 Miriam J Dobson, 'The Post-Stalin Era: De-Stalinization, Daily Life, and Dissent', *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 12.4 (2011), 905-24.

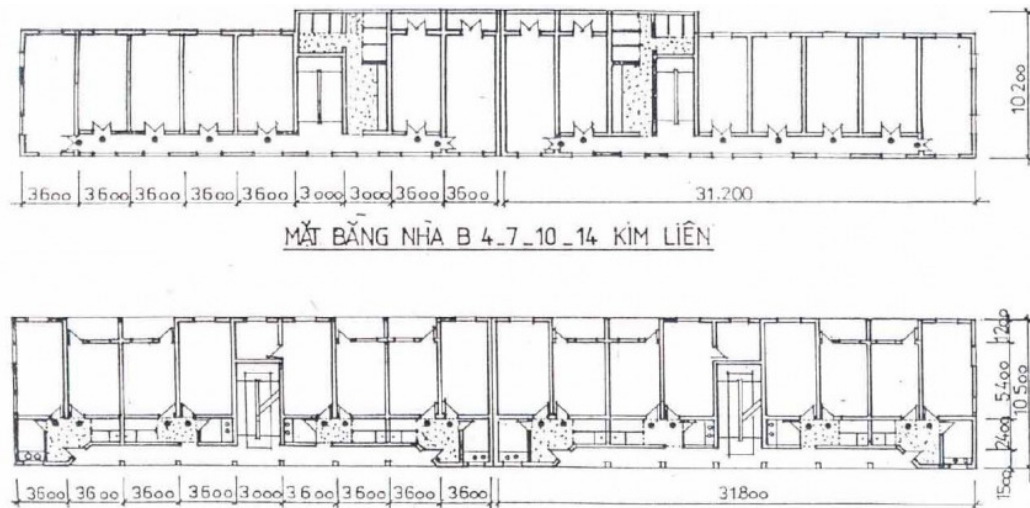


Fig. 265. Floorplans of KTT blocks in Kim Liên, made por Hoàng Đức Vĩnh in 2001. Source: Geertman, Stephanie, «The self-organizing city in Vietnam; processes of change and transformation in housing in Hanoi» (Technische Universiteit Eindhoven, 2007), p.240.

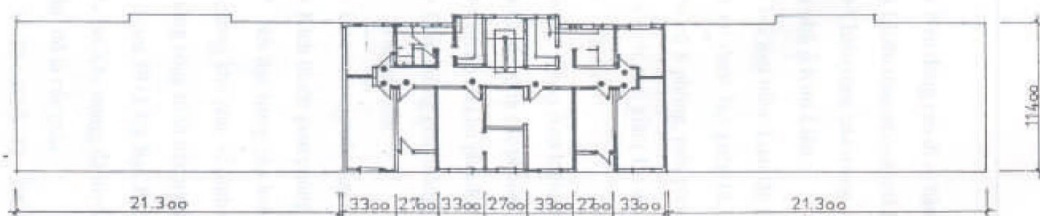


Fig. 266. Floorplans of KTT blocks in KTT Nguyễn Công Trứ, Source: Geertman, Stephanie, 'The self-organizing city in Vietnam; processes of change and transformation in housing in Hanoi' (Technische Universiteit Eindhoven, 2007), p.240.

to openly criticize the architects and even the management, yet invoked the public authorities as allies to achieve their own improvements in their quality of life.

In the face of frontal resistance tactics and in view of the limitations of freedoms, reaffirmations of power or rhetorical assertions of sovereignty, the production of domestic space is defined by the tactics that are implemented on a day-to-day basis. These are relatively spontaneous actions, lacking a master plan beyond that of their own execution and protected by the tactical and stealthy adaptation of the general provisions of the environment to the individual circumstances of each family and individual. It is again a matter of 'going around the state' rather than going directly against it. Redefined in terms of austerity, functionalism and hygiene, the socialist and modern *uitt* was as much at odds with the ideals of bourgeois comfort as with those of Stalinism or the rural periphery. The 'tapestries hung on walls with swans, kittens, tigers, female busts, portraits of important people and so on, painted in oils. This is wrong! Don't depend on rugs and tapestries, because they collect dust'. Contemporary furniture should be comfortable to use, compact, light and without nooks and crannies or frills that are difficult to wash and clean'.¹⁷ Prefabricated panel systems were the ideal artefact to celebrate the style of space age society, enjoying mass production methods that would raise living standards for all workers.

¹⁷ Reid.



Fig. 267. Peter Steinhauer, from the series *Nha Hanoi*, c.1990s. Source: Peter Steinhauer.

However, inhabitants were faced with the challenge of resisting these intrusions into their domestic space in ‘creative and surprising’ ways, adapting standardized spaces to their specific tastes and circumstances. This conflict was particularly evident in shared kitchens, which were the space in the home where greater precision and more specialised tools were required. The need to share them also raised issues of politics, coexistence and the need for self-management, giving rise to the need to weave informal networks of negotiation and mutual favours to circumvent the practical limitations imposed by the ‘rationality’ of design. Many former inhabitants complained to Reid about the difficulties of situating appliances in a practical way without breaking regulations. The kitchen furniture had to be classified into mobile and fixed elements -stove and sink- since the latter did not have elastic water and gas conduits, regardless of whether this arrangement was practicable, thus conditioning the layout of the kitchen as a whole.

Before the arrival of the automobile, the construction of domestic spaces was, probably, one of the main vertices that linked the informal economy of goods, services and favours, consolidating the social networks of mutual dependence. Thus, there was a latent contradiction between pre-modern forms of habitation and power structures and the outward image of modernity of industrialized space-age apartment construction.

The *Global Encyclopaedia of Informality*, although focused on Eastern Europe, raises many cases of mixed structures of informality and formality in the post-communist context.¹⁸ The woman would be a fundamental actor in this underground spatial dispute for her condition as the main agent in the management and transformation of the domestic space. Christine Hannemann claimed that, to some extent, female practice within households called into question the jurisdiction of the

18 Alena Ledeneva, *The Global Encyclopaedia of Informality. Volume 1*, ed. by Alena Ledeneva and others (London: UCL Press, 2018); Alena Ledeneva, *The Global Encyclopaedia of Informality. Volume 2*, ed. by Alena Ledeneva and others (London: UCL Press, 2018) .



Fig. 268. Interior layouts of three Hanoi communal apartment buildings: Kim Liên (a), Trung Tu (b) and Nguyễn Công Trù (c). Source: author, based on plans and drawings gathered by Geertman, Stephanie, 'The Self-Organizing City in Vietnam; Processes of Change and Transformation in Housing in Hanoi' (Technische Universiteit Eindhoven, 2007).

state.¹⁹ Thus, while architects and planners set the parameters of the new housing and industrial designers sought to shape the way women transformed apartments, introducing the new modern aesthetic into modern housing would depend almost entirely on the female public. The educational efforts were directed to them in order to transcend the Christian antithesis between the home and communism, making compatible the idea of a cosy dwelling and the atomic modernity celebrated by communism. The *domestic* was to be redefined in a way that reconciled with the enlightened values of progress, science and reason through modernist aesthetics. However, Lefebvre appears here again.

However, the arrival of international communism in its Soviet, Chinese and North Korean variants would make the issue much more complex. In relation to the Soviet housing program, Susan Reid documented the quest for domestic *uiut* through interior fittings and the special role of the *Salon kovrv* ('living room carpet') - a distinctly feminine cultural product - in importing rural comfort into modernist apartments. Carpets were used to insulate the walls of the *Khrushchyovkas* and were considered a sumptuary good, characteristic of traditional Russian housing and, when not imported from Central Asia, traditionally made by women. An example of how instructions on good taste and rationalization of aesthetics were tactically reworked in everyday practice.²⁰

19 Christine Hannemann, 'Women as "Socialist" Dwellers: Socialist Everyday Lives in the German Democratic Republic', in *The Routledge Companion to Modernity, Space and Gender*, ed. by Alexandra Staub (Routledge, 2018).

20 The photographic reportage *Communal Living in Russia*, by Illya Utekhin deals with spatial appropriations, especially of kitchens as sensitive spaces where conflicts between collectivity and individualism, gender and culture were settled.



Fig. 269. Cooking in the shared corridors of a rationalist housing block. Birdcages with life poultry can be noticed next to the cooks. Screenshots from the documentary by Nelobo Architects. 'Lines of Flight 0.1/ KTT Kim Liên (1999-2000)', 2009.



Fig. 270. Wet activities such performed in the common areas of the KTT apartments of Văn Chương in 2013, out of the normalized spaces (kitchen, bathroom) designated for such purposes. Hanoi. Source: Neighbours association of KTT Nguyễn Công Trứ / Facebook.

Kitchens are spaces that are at the crossroads between industrial design and everyday life; they are spaces of mediation of such culturally important uses as food preparation and socializing. They have the added complexity of having to be shared by several families and are also subject to the technological constraints of the most complex artefacts found in a modern home: refrigerators, ovens and other kitchen tools. The dimensions, conception, costs and standardization of these appliances depended on the rigidities of the communist production system and

decision-making by committees that tended to dilute the most innovative or disruptive ideas. It is therefore natural that the shared kitchens of the *Khrushchyovkas* and KTTs were the main points of conflict where the advantages and shortcomings of state planning were most strongly expressed in industrial and architectural design. Any visit to collective dwellings reveals how Vietnamese families, today, still prefer to extract culinary activities from the spaces conventionally allocated as kitchens; they did so when they did not feel comfortable in the narrow shared kitchens and still do so today when they place their stoves, pots and vegetables in the corridors and common spaces of modern KDMTs. The anthropological component of this cultural, spatial and functional dislocation has yet to be studied. Russian architect Natalia Dmitrievna Sulimova, assistant to Boris Mezentsev and interviewed by Logan in 1996, designed many of the socialist housing blocks in Hanoi, which were especially notable for their use of Soviet pre-stressed module technology.²¹ In *The Khrushchev Kitchen: Domesticating the Scientific-Technological Revolution*, Susan Reid explored the politicization of the space of the Soviet home, since it was precisely the kitchen space where the different narratives of industry, standardization, culture, communitarianism and femininity clashed most vociferously. All this under the influence of the propagandistic representations of Soviet socialism that glorified female emancipation within the framework of solidarity among workers; the nations of the NAM ('Non-Aligned Nations') bloc, especially the African and Asian ones, were thus offered alternative models of female emancipation²² to those of the West.²³

21 William S. Logan, *Hanoi, Biography of a City* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000), p. 196.

22 See in this respect the work of Soviet realist painters such as Klavdia Osheva, Tatiana Tsigal.

23 Christine Varga-Harris, 'Between National Tradition and Western Modernization: Soviet Woman and Representations of Socialist Gender Equality as a "Third Way" for Developing Countries, 1956–1964', *Slavic Review*, 78.3 (2019), 758–81.



Fig. 271. Illegal apartment extensions in Khu tập thể Quỳnh Mai, Hanói, 2019. Source: author.

5.2.2.1 Constructing the Hanging Cages

Squatting of public spaces, land and housing began as small skirmishes on the fringes of social monitoring and, as economic growth consolidated after the take-off of the *Đổi Mới*, increased in volume and intensity. Shanty towns began to spring up in 1982 along Giảng Võ Street next to the Exhibition Centre. The construction was completed in one or two days and was consolidated before the *phường* was even aware of it. An informal market for land, which was appropriated by staking and kept by its new owners, developed in the city, with building rights being transferred on the black market. Other sites sprang up near factories and industrial sites such as Nguyễn Trãi and near Cao Sà Lát. By the 1980s the state's inaction was such that the occupants had moved on to bypass this first phase of groping and erect permanent structures without qualms.²⁴

Since the *Đổi Mới*, and especially during the late 1990s, many families extended and renovated their apartments to accommodate the increased prosperity and quality of life experienced in Hanoi. Most of the apartments were overcrowded and in very poor maintenance conditions. The central corridors featured makeshift kitchens, with their stoves venting smoke into the hallway in keeping with the Vietnamese custom of avoiding cooking inside one's own home, and shoes and slippers were piled up and removed when entering the dwellings. There was a critical need to improve the interior spaces of these dwellings that would gradually begin to be addressed. To obtain extra living space, many neighbours extended their balconies and converted them into rooms serving the household (fig. 271). A *Chuồng cọp*²⁵ is usually supported by steel beams attached to the main structure

²⁴ Koh, p. 227.

²⁵ Once noted that 'tiger cage' is a controversial term, it must be remarked that Dinh Quoc Phuong, one of most

of the building. While its width sticks to the available width of your apartment, its cantilevered length depends on the owners. Most are between one and one and a half meters, but some go as high as three meters. Through negotiations between the neighbours, the inhabitants of the second floors can lean on the tents on the lower level.

Most of the *Chuồng cạp* are built by the inhabitants themselves, using recycled materials and finished by hand. Therefore, the self-built rooms have a similar structure supported by steel frames with lightweight flat roofs, but presenting diverse patterns of uses, colours and decoration. The most popular material is corrugated sheets, usually painted red or green. Some apartments have less sophisticated materials such as fibre-cement, plastic or old bamboo canes. *Chuồng cạp* used as bedrooms often have slits for ventilation and when fitted out as hanging gardens can accommodate a variety of domestic activities such as clotheslines, cooking with charcoal stoves.

Đình Quốc Phương recounted in *The Impact of "Informal" Building Additions on Interior/Exterior Space in Hanoi's Old Apartment Blocks (KTT)* the transformations of two apartments in the Khu Tập Thể located in Nguyễn Công Trứ, offering a very detailed analysis of the logic governing these seemingly anarchic structures. Đình Quốc Phương examines the interior space of two flats 304 and 309 in Block B1, owned by Mrs. Viet and Mr. Long respectively, both of whom were state enterprise workers who migrated to Hanoi after the war ended. Originally, both apartments had the same layout and the account of their transformations serves as a testimony to the aspirations of Vietnam's new middle class.²⁶

In 1996 Mr. Long lived in apartment 304 and wanted to expand his apartment, but he needed the cooperation or at least the consent of the owners of the two lower floor units that fell below his perimeter. The owners of these apartments refused to cooperate or approve, but those below in the neighbouring unit 309 agreed, so Mr. Long suggested to Mrs. Viet, who lived in 309, that they exchange apartments to help him carry out his plan.

According to Phương, Mr. Long's original apartment remained by 2011 in the state it was fifty years ago. Its one bedroom provided accommodation for five members of the same family. The main room served as a living room and bedroom for the married couple. A small wooden platform was built over their bed to provide a bedroom for their two children, as well as a small storage space. The balcony was adapted as a bedroom for her mother-in-law and was large enough to still accommodate a study table. The family used to share a common service block with kitchens, bathrooms and toilets with four other families which was located across the common corridor. Although such amenities were originally intended to be shared, in the late 1980s, as part of a government-funded renovation project, these rooms

cited authors on the matter, has used it frequently.

26 Đình Quốc Phương, 'The Impact of "Informal" Building Additions on Interior/Exterior Space in Hanoi's Old Apartment Blocks (KTT)', *Architecture in the Fourth Dimension*, Nov (2011), 131–38.



Fig. 272. Commonal areas in the collective KTT apartments of Nguyễn Công Trứ in 2013, Hanoi. Source: Neighbours association of KTT Nguyễn Công Trứ / Facebook.

were divided so that each family could enjoy exclusive use of them. Mr. Long paid some additional money so that his renovated kitchen would have better quality.

The furnishings were almost entirely original and consisted of a latrine, a bathtub, a built-in water tank and a built-in kitchen. Due to the long and narrow arrangement of the wet areas, probably attributable to the designer's aim to maximize the façade exposure for the living rooms, ventilation was poor and the atmosphere was damp and dark (fig. 272). As consequence, as a quick fix that somehow used to turn permanent, plastered walls and ceilings were often covered by plastic sheets. If moisture could not be kept out of the partitions, it should at least be hidden with some happy-looking cotton cloud patterns. To the heavy use of deep fried and boiled food in Vietnamese cooking led inhabitants to take cooking activities to the common corridors. These were wide open and the ladies could enjoy wider room to operate utensils and, as important as the food-making, gathering socially. As an additional burden, the built-in compartments conceived by the Soviet architects with the purposes of storing kitchen utensils and ingredients were too small. The KTT inhabitants brought with them the cooking habits fit for the rural life, including storage of vegetables and rice in large quantities together with life poultry, and pans and clay pots that were to be operated in squat position, not standing as Westerners were used to. If the adaptation to the industrial life of the Atomic Era had already been cause of disruptions in many peripheral regions of the Soviet Union, here in Hanoi such pretension turned to be a baseless dream.

The transformations of Mr. Long's apartment did continue following cheerful events in the family, according to Phương's chronicle.²⁷ When his son married, the

²⁷ Phương, 'The Impact of "Informal" Building Additions on Interior/Exterior Space in Hanoi's Old Apartment

new couple moved into the apartment, adding further pressure to the need for space. Mr. Long negotiated with the three neighbours on the lower floors: the family on the ground floor would build load-bearing walls for an extra room that would be able to support the load of the extensions on the two upper floors, including Mr. Long's. The foundation costs were split between the three owners. This operation allowed Mr. Long to double the floor area of his apartment and, as a result, the apartment became much more longitudinal: it went from seven meters to sixteen. While the interior renovation had been approved by the government, other changes such as the extension of the living space to the outside lacked any permission. At the time Đinh Quốc Phương interviewed Mr. Long, he was considering the purchase of the neighbouring apartment to create an additional extension that would then result in a very long apartment: thirty meters deep. Given the 16 meters depth of the renovated apartment, Mr. Long still had room to create an interior courtyard between the original and the new room, which has become a fundamental articulation of the apartment space by providing ventilation and lighting. Thanks to the installation of trellises, burglaries are prevented without depriving the interior of the apartment of adequate ventilation.

The light well that was created also reflected the multipurpose nature of the courtyards of the old row houses and the spatial development of the traditional 'tube houses'. The mere fact that Mrs. Viet agreed to exchange her apartment with Mr. Long in order to circumvent the opposition of the neighbours reveals a way of coping with communal living that is specific to Vietnam, perhaps even specific to those who grew up in socialist Hanoi. The subsequent agreement to distribute the costs and the gained spaces among the neighbours of apartment 309 is another example of fruitful collaboration that would not have been possible through a formal agreement, even if the work could have been doable in theory. The way in which the inhabitants of Hanoi adapted to the impositions of an imported built form has generated over the years a spatiality characteristic of Hanoi that, despite its technical problems, has the advantages of being an architecture generated according to the changing needs of the user. These qualities could be enhanced and improved with the right technical support.²⁸ It is therefore crucial for designers to observe, document and understand the vital patterns within these structures that reflect tradition and culture and can carry the will to preserve the meaning that place has for those who belong to these neighborhoods.²⁹

Since obtaining permits from city officials to make interior space renovations or add extra rooms was required by law, for landlords like Mr. Long the tactic was to make arrangements with neighbours who would cooperate or at least not hinder the renovation. Mr. Long, presumably a man of action, stated flatly to Phương that he was not concerned with obtaining legal permissions but with reaching agree-

Blocks (KTT)', p. 135.

28 Phương, 'The Impact of "Informal" Building Additions on Interior/Exterior Space in Hanoi's Old Apartment Blocks (KTT)', p. 136.P.136.

29 We thus see these structures as a cultural artifact that, in fact, could be understood as an extension of the spatial and territorial logic of the Barrio de las Treinta y Seis Calles.



Fig. 273. Examples of information billboards or *thông báo* in the common areas of KTTs in Hanoi, 2019. Source: Neighbours association of KTT Nguyễn Công Trứ / Facebook.



Fig. 274. Communal kitchens in the KTT Nguyễn Công Trứ (built in 1963) as documented in 2013, Hanoi. Source: Neighbours association of KTT Nguyễn Công Trứ / Facebook.

ments with his neighbours: it was therefore vital to maintain good neighbourliness since, if there were no disputes or tensions of any kind, the district authorities would ignore the problem. However, if the neighbours were not in agreement, the sub-district authorities might have to intervene and force a halt to the work and subsequent demolition of the unauthorised structures.

These actions were possible essentially as a result of informal agreements between neighbours, which are the key to illegal approvals by local authorities. The informal agreements were based on mutual trust, for which it is indispensable to 'show one's face', since the agreements have no legal basis and are sustained only by the reputation of the contracting parties. It should be noted that the authorities renounce to exercise their authority; they would only intervene by literally applying the law at the moment of conflict between individuals with the paternalistic attitude that Chen had defined as characteristic of the *minjian*. Koh argued in *Wards of Hanoi* that the one-party penetration of society had been as much about establishing a system of control as one of mediation. Repression could be strict and brutal, but it could also be relaxed at will. In fact, according to Koh, it is this adaptability that has allowed communism in Vietnam to remain strong through countless hardships and conflicts of war. The ambivalence of political power, expressed in the debate between local culture and European hygienism, is expressed in Vietnam through this modulated tolerance exercised by the Party and thus arbitrarily applied according to political expediency. The dominance of party-state relations allows for the development of public policies with little or no consultation with the masses; these policies are presented to be implemented directly by the *phường*. However, *phường* officials often find inconsistencies to state policies, thus creating shadow zones. Conflicts born out of the practical implementation of these

policies remained subject to cooperation between the state technocrats, the commissars accompanying them through the Party structure, and the *phường* staff.³⁰

Just as Logan, through the narrations of some of the architects involved, found 'silent dissent' in the frictions between Soviet advisors and Vietnamese experts, Hanoi authorities accept and consecrate their subordination to the central government, before acting discretionally in the way they find most appropriate in their day-to-day affairs. It is in this shadowy space that the capacity of the inhabitants to colonize the common spaces of the KTTs is manifested, taking advantage of the slowness and ineffectiveness of the various instances of the administrative apparatus. Likewise, Koh also pointed out the ambiguous space in which the district officers themselves often find themselves, conflicting situations because they themselves, their social, familial sphere, belong to the very society they are supposed to police. Popular sayings such as *Một người làm quan, cả họ được nhờ* ('If one of us becomes Mandarin, the whole clan will receive perks') and *Chín được chấp nhận là mười* ('a nine is accepted as a ten') illustrate the social expectation that a leader will be reasonably sympathetic to minor individual faults.³¹ Reciprocity in this laxity is expected in return, and all parties are expected to avoid *mất mặt* ('losing face'). Soviet-concept housing was thus adapted to Vietnamese modes of social life where family and community ties were more robust: socializing in the street was mediated through commercial activities that invite conversation such as cafes,³² beauty salons, food shops. Public space became an extension of home spaces and several generations of the same family lived together under the same roof, as Stephanie Geertman, Nami Hong and Saehoon Kim point out.³³

The transformations of the Khu Tập Thể in Hanoi have been understood as an example of the production of space as theorized by Lefebvre.³⁴ Derived from Soviet, North Korean architecture, the KTTs were re-appropriated through the changing practices of everyday life in Hanoi, readjusted to the 'perceived' space that was architecturally, culturally and functionally closer to the granularity of Hanoi's urban fabrics.

The current state of Khu Tập Thể Nguyễn Công Trứ presents representative images of many Soviet apartments that are a testament to the architectural mix of Đổi Mới Hanoi. The later market economy is responsible for the gradual increases in day-to-day local life and the physical transformation of the apartments. The spatial transformation of the Khu Tập Thể Khu was thus a result of informal building practices that represented the attempt to increase the new living standards. These extensions were furthermore motivated by the particular interests of the small

30 Koh, p. 29.

31 These sayings are collected by Malarney, quoted by Koh, p. 230.

32 The cafes of Hanoi are a celebrated metabolization of French culture in the Hanoian way of life and its social life; they play an irreplaceable role as elements of cohesion and adequacy of public spaces.

33 Stephanie Geertman, 'The Self-Organizing City in Vietnam; Processes of Change and Transformation in Housing in Hanoi' (Technische Universiteit Eindhoven, 2007); Nami Hong and Saehoon Kim, 'Persistence of the Socialist Collective Housing Areas (KTTs): The Evolution and Contemporary Transformation of Mass Housing in Hanoi, Vietnam', *Journal of Housing and the Built Environment*, 2020, 601–625.

34 Emmanuel Cerise, director of the Hanoi City Institute, is one of the main promoters of its value as spontaneous architecture.



Fig. 275. Daily life activities in the common areas of Kim Liên neighbourhood. Housekeepers, gardeners, barbers and badminton players. Screenshots from the documentary by Nelobo Architects. 'Lines of Flight 0.1/ KTT Kim Liên (1999-2000)', 2009.

owner, petty bourgeois working with an eye to future financial returns on their housing and who belonged to the relatively privileged caste of skilled state personnel. Often, directly violating the rules, *phá rào* ('breaking the fence') was the only way to achieve results. To provide the population with 'decent' housing, for a standard that was evolving faster than legislation could do, a variety of informal methods emerged: pleading, lobbying, political connections, bribery at various levels of administration, or other 'administrative guerrilla' tactics.³⁵

Since the existing regulations are not open enough to adequately respond to the daily needs for better indoor and outdoor spaces, the lax control of municipal authorities and subsequent illegal constructions metaphorically present, whether they pursue it or not, an 'open space' that seems to informally but effectively help mediate the tension between the so-called conceived space and the perceived space of Hanoi's Khu Tập Thể.

Since the turn of the century there have been several initiatives for the demolition of KTTs which, given the high profit potential, were initially intended to be left to private capital. In Kim Liên, which had been documented by Nelobo architects in 1999-2000, at a time when it hosted 21,000 inhabitants while it was originally planned for 7,000, demolition works in some precise areas started as early as in 2003.³⁶ Still stands. However, while industrial areas did become modern urban developments, the expropriation of collective housing still faced a variety of problems; to solve this, the demolition of those blocks that did not present acceptable sanitary conditions was instructed, although the practical execution of the rule faced endless complications.³⁷

³⁵ Koh, p. 39.

³⁶ Nelobo Architects, 'Lines of Flight 0.1/ KTT Kim Liên (1999-2000)', Nelobo, 2009 <http://www.nelobo.com/travaux/06_ldf01/06_ldf01_eng.php> [accessed 4 May 2023].

³⁷ The demolition of unviable buildings was stipulated in resolution 07/2005/NQ-HDND Drumond and Nguyen, p. 81.



Fig. 276. Exhibition poster for Nguyễn Thế Sơn Hanoi a Living Museum, 2015. Source: Nguyễn Thế Sơn.

5.2.2.2 Streets and Memories

In early 2008, the Hanoi People's Committee decided to demolish the decrepit Khu Tập Thể of Nguyễn Công Trứ and build modern residential and commercial developments. By 2011, two blocks³⁸ had already been demolished but the process is still ongoing due to litigation related to expropriations, remaining fully inhabited even today.

In the case of Vietnam, the re-evaluation of spatial re-appropriations of housing has required a direct re-examination of the *Thời Bao Cấp* (Subsidised Economy) period (1975-1986). An era characterised by scarcity and never-ending wars (China, Laos, Cambodia) that still generates mixed reactions from the public today. The 2006 exhibition at the Vietnam Ethnographic Museum (VEM) opened the door to its critical re-evaluation, always within the parameters allowed by the Party, but in "heterodox forms unconceivable a few years earlier".³⁹ Dioramas depicting everyday life at the time were presented, including idealised versions of the interiors of KTT flats (fig. 277). Many attendees were thus able to find meaning in their memories of a period in which there was no information or narrative other than that set by the state.⁴⁰ The *redirected* character of this re-evaluation is transpired in the interview that Nguyễn Văn Huy, former director of the VEM, would give on the occasion of the exhibition's tenth anniversary to *Nhân Dân*, the official journal of the Communist Party. Huy recounted a visit in 2010 to a similar exhibition in Prague on life during the socialist period, finding a "totally different approach: bitterness, anger and determination to make a break with the past".⁴¹ Short after, same outlet featured an interview with economist Martín

38 Chengwei Xia, 'Hanoi / The Breakdown of the Socialist Housing', *Architectural History / Theory: The City*, 2015 <<http://fac.arch.hku.hk/asian-cities-research/the-ward-and-the-breakdown-of-the-socialist-housing-regime/>> [accessed 22 May 2021].

39 Ken McLean, 'The Rehabilitation of an Uncomfortable Past: Everyday Life in Vietnam during the Subsidy Period (1975-1986)', *History and Anthropology*, 19.3 (2008), 281-303 (p. 283).

40 Huong Nguyen, 'Voices in the Shadow of Independence: Vietnamese Opinion on Some National Issues in the Period of 1979 - 1986' (Ohio University, 2010), p. 118; McLean, p. 283.

41 Thuan Khanh, 'First Exhibition on Subsidy Period: It Is Not Just a Tale', *Nhân Dân*, 2016 <<https://en.nhandan.vn/culture/heritage/item/4011902-first-exhibition-on-subsidy-period-it-is-not-just-a-tale.html>> [accessed 1 February 2022].



Fig. 277.
Reconstruction of a collective apartment during the Subsidized Economy. Exhibition 'Hanoi life in the subsidy period 1975 - 1986' at the Ethnographic Museum of Hanoi, 2011. Photography by Nguyễn Tuấn Anh. Source: Ethnographic Museum of Hanoi.

Rama, who praised the KTTs environmental quality which was, in part, thanks to the modifications made by its own inhabitants; his view was consistent with the critical but constructive re-appraisal of the post-war architectural legacy.⁴²

By year 2021, the main obstacle to the demolition of these blocks was the compensation to the residents; we must remember that they are located in relatively central areas of the city, especially the oldest ones such as Nguyễn Công Trứ and Kim Liên and hosted in its beginnings the middle and senior cadres of the administration, army and Communist Party so its current residents have a privileged network of contacts in government, universities and media. Since the title deeds for the apartments granted in the 1990s did not specify the conditions in case of expropriation and demolition, the owners are in a very advantageous position when it comes to litigating for greater economic compensation in view of the substantial real estate benefits that the construction of blocks up to three times higher than the existing ones, according to the projects presented. This, added to the limitations of adapting the existing infrastructure and that the general plan in force prohibited, precisely in an attempt to curb illegal occupation practices, further densification of the KTTs, means that there is no clear horizon for the moment.

Micro-crayon blocks are home to forty percent of the urban population in Central and Eastern European countries today, housing more than 160 million people.⁴³ As recently demonstrated by research such as Nami Hong and Saehoon Kim's *Persistence of the socialist collective housing areas (KTT's): the evolution and contemporary transformation of mass housing in Hanoi, Vietnam*, Hanoi's KTT's have become intimate and vibrant communities, equipped with good public services and wooded areas that are highly desirable for their advantageous locations and affordable prices.⁴⁴ In addition to these practical and environmental qualities, Đinh Quốc Phương⁴⁵ lays claim to its historical and cultural value, representing a specif-

42 'Martin Rama, a Uruguayan Economist with Big Love for Hanoi', *Nhân Dân*, 2017 <<http://en.nhandan.org.vn/culture/item/5743002-martin-rama-a-uruguayan-economist-with-big-love-for-hanoi.html>> [accessed 14 August 2016].

43 Hong and Kim.

44 Hong and Kim.

45 Đinh Quốc Phương, '(Re)Developing Old Apartment Blocks in Hanoi: Government Vision, Local Resistance and



Fig. 278.
Nguyễn Thế Sơn, diorama
of the exhibition *City and
Memory*, 2016. Source:
Nguyễn Thế Sơn.

ic stage in Hanoi's history which, we must stress, corresponds with the infancy or early youth of today's intellectual elites.

Nguyễn Thế Sơn (b. 1978) is an artist and architect from Hanoi who grew up in Kim Lien's KTT. With a highly internationalized background in China and Europe, Thế Sơn is able to construct a cosmopolitan yet reminiscent discourse about his childhood in socialist housing neighborhoods. His work deals with the social imprint of these slums as a repository of collective memory and the recent architectural heritage of Hanoi. His installation *8m2* in 2014, presented a reconstruction of the living spaces that constituted the beginning of contemporary Hanoi (fig. 279 in the interiors of the KTT apartments, referring to the area to inhabitant allocated ratio that was officially assigned).

His exhibition *City and Memory* (2016) at L'Espace in Hanoi, signalled a change of the public attitude towards the KTT neighbourhoods and their informal streetscape (fig. 240). *City and Memory* consisted on a set of dioramas that enhanced the fragmented volumetry of the 'tiger cages' (although they could not yet be called that publicly at the time). Thế Sơn accompanied the display with newspaper clippings and old photographs, documenting the social history of the Khu Tập Thể apartments. His intention was clear: to reveal the old neighborhoods of modern socialist architecture as elements of the collective memory of Hanoi society (fig. 280).

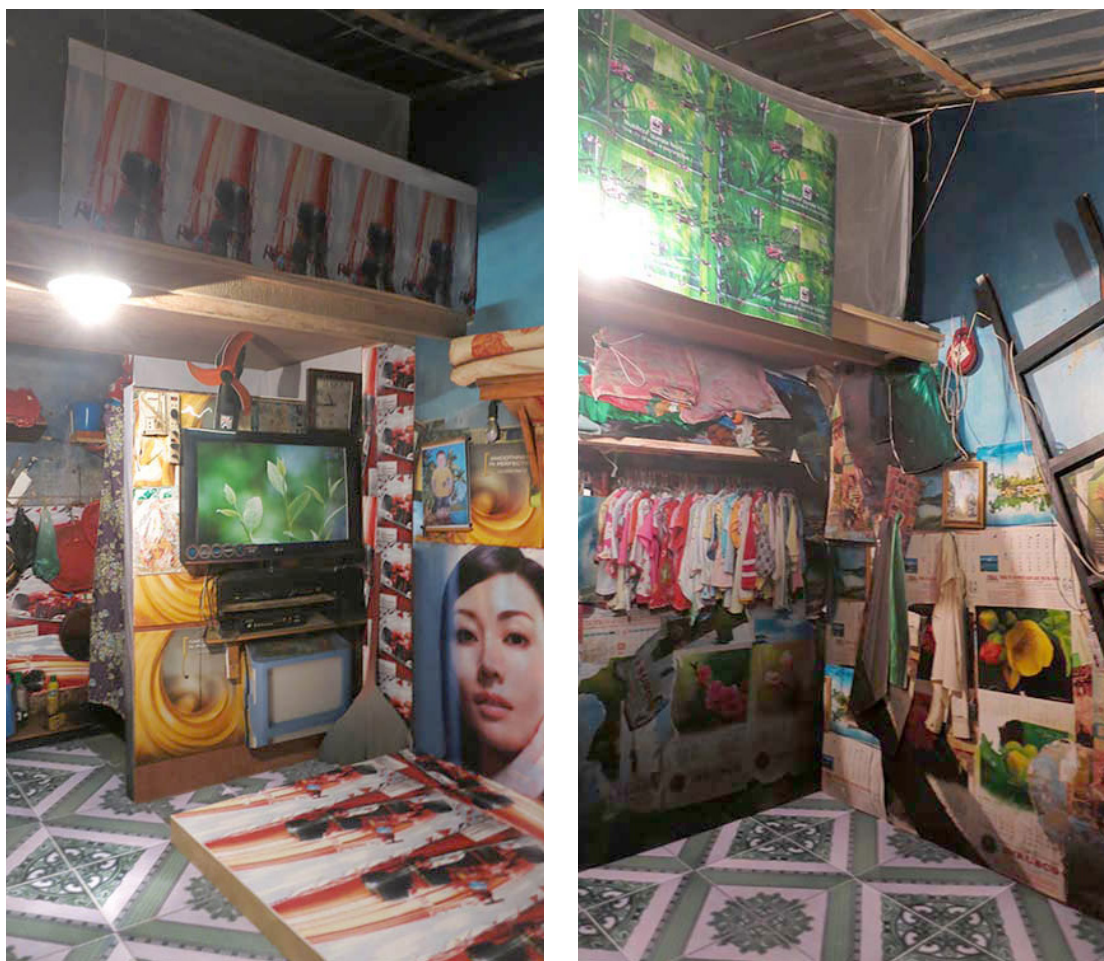


Fig. 279. Nguyễn Thế Sơn, 1:1 dioramas of collective housing in the exhibition *8m2*, 2014. Source: Nguyễn Thế Sơn.



Fig. 280. Nguyễn Thế Sơn, diorama of the exhibition *City and Memory*, 2016. Source: Nguyễn Thế Sơn.

By 2022, the city had 1,216 registered colonial villas, including 367 that were own by the state for official purposes, 117 belonging to private owners or under some mix public-private scheme and others, still co-owned by several households. The *Artists' House*, a French colonial villa collectivised in 1954, hosted together fourteen families of renowned artists such as Nguyễn Phan Chánh, Đỗ Nhuận, and Nguyễn Văn Bổng (fig. 281). Its ramshackle volumes became the centre of Hanoi's cultural life, and some of the relatives of this generation of artists still reside there. The *Artists' House* served as the cover for *Thế Sơn Hanoi, a Living Museum* (2015) because of this cultured halo, ranging between nostalgia and the celebration of collective progress (fig. 276). Although the academia consensus is that these villas should be immediately rehabilitated, the government attitude swings in unpredictable ways, reflecting their inner, unfathomable struggles. To the disdain of the villas as the most palpable icons of colonial privileged, witnesses of the racist dominance of French colonists, adds the succulent Real Estate value of their urban locations. In 8th of April of 2022, the city government announced that 600 of these villas would be sold into the private market (which, basically, equalled to a sentence for demolition); in some attempt to whitewash such attach on the city's historic heritage, the declaration played the identity card by promising to use the revenue to restore the city's 'old monuments', understood as the precolonial monuments, which under the council's eyes appeared to be more authentic. Fortunately, ten days later, the city's Party Committee suspended the outrageous initiative in wait for a 'comprehensive review'.⁴⁶ This is a textbook example of 'muddling through' policies, disguised under the never-ending succession of technical reports.

Another proof of the gradual shift in the public appreciation for these architectures was the publication in *Nhân Dân*, the mouthpiece newspaper of the Vietnamese Communist Party, of an interview with Martin Rama, an Uruguayan consultant to the World Bank who had retired in Hanoi, the city where he had lived for the last 20 years.⁴⁷ Rama advocated the preservation and judicious restoration of the urban environments of the KTTs, praising the community atmosphere and the quality of the urban environment (greenery, public services and local commerce) that had been generated over the years.

Jane Jacobs affirmed that 'Cities are an immense laboratory of trial and error, failure and success, in city building and city design'.⁴⁸ The clamorous failure in creating convenient housing for the Hanoiense, gave place to unexpected triumphs. The successive political ideologies that attempted to form the capital city ended by given place, in an accidental way, public spaces of unexpected quality. Circled by small encroached business such as hair salons, cafés, bike repair, dotted by the occasional public playgrounds and kindergarten that still stand and the lustful greenery and big trees of subtropical Hanoi. Being a fully Vietnamese creation, however, such urban production would have been impossible without the footprint of the

46 Vo Hai, 'Hanoi Suspends Sale of 600 Villas Pending Conservation Review', *Vn Express International*, 2022 <<https://e.vnexpress.net/news/news/hanoi-suspends-sale-of-600-villas-pending-conservation-review-4453386.html>> [accessed 5 May 2022].

47 'Martin Rama, a Uruguayan Economist with Big Love for Hanoi'.

48 Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), p. 6.



Fig. 281. 'House of the Artists': a collectivized colonial mansion featuring a number of informal modifications at Nguyễn Thái Học street, Hanoi. Source: author.

Soviet planners, neither without the previous presence of the French colonizers. A map scratched by competing pre-existence which also confront the underlying forces of the agricultural water networks that formed the territory beneath.

When asking herself that would make a Great City street safe and livable, Jacobs, she listed a set of conditions such as, for example, a clear delimitation between public and private. In smaller cities, safety would be achieved in a different way: 'through a web of reputation, gossip, approval, disapproval and sanctions, all of which are powerful if people know each other and word travels.'⁴⁹ Personal capital, reputation and gossip, mediated by the apparently careless but fully omniscient eyes of the *phuong*. The interior streets of the KTTs operated then as a small village, a gated community governed by an intertwined net of watchful eyes. The quality of the public, communal spaces created inside the KTT neighbourhoods have a mixed origin and awake a bitter-sweet appraisal in their people, same as the French tree-align avenues. The partial achievements of Soviet urbanism (in spite of its documented failures) blended the Vietnamese meddling through problem-solving approach. Spontaneously built under a very particular intertwine between the state and the domestic realm, the open spaces of the KTT quarters enjoy today an inopinated, outstanding quality in terms of urban design and livability (fig. 282-283).

49 Jacobs, p. 38.



Fig. 282. Public spaces inside the KTT in Nghĩa Tân, Hanoi. Source: author, 2019.



Fig. 283. Public spaces inside the KTT in Bắc Thành Công. Source: author, 2019.



Fig. 284. Public spaces inside the KTT in Trung Tu, Hanoi. Source: author, 2019.



Fig. 285. Public spaces inside the KTT in Kiem Lien, Hanoi. Source: author, 2019.

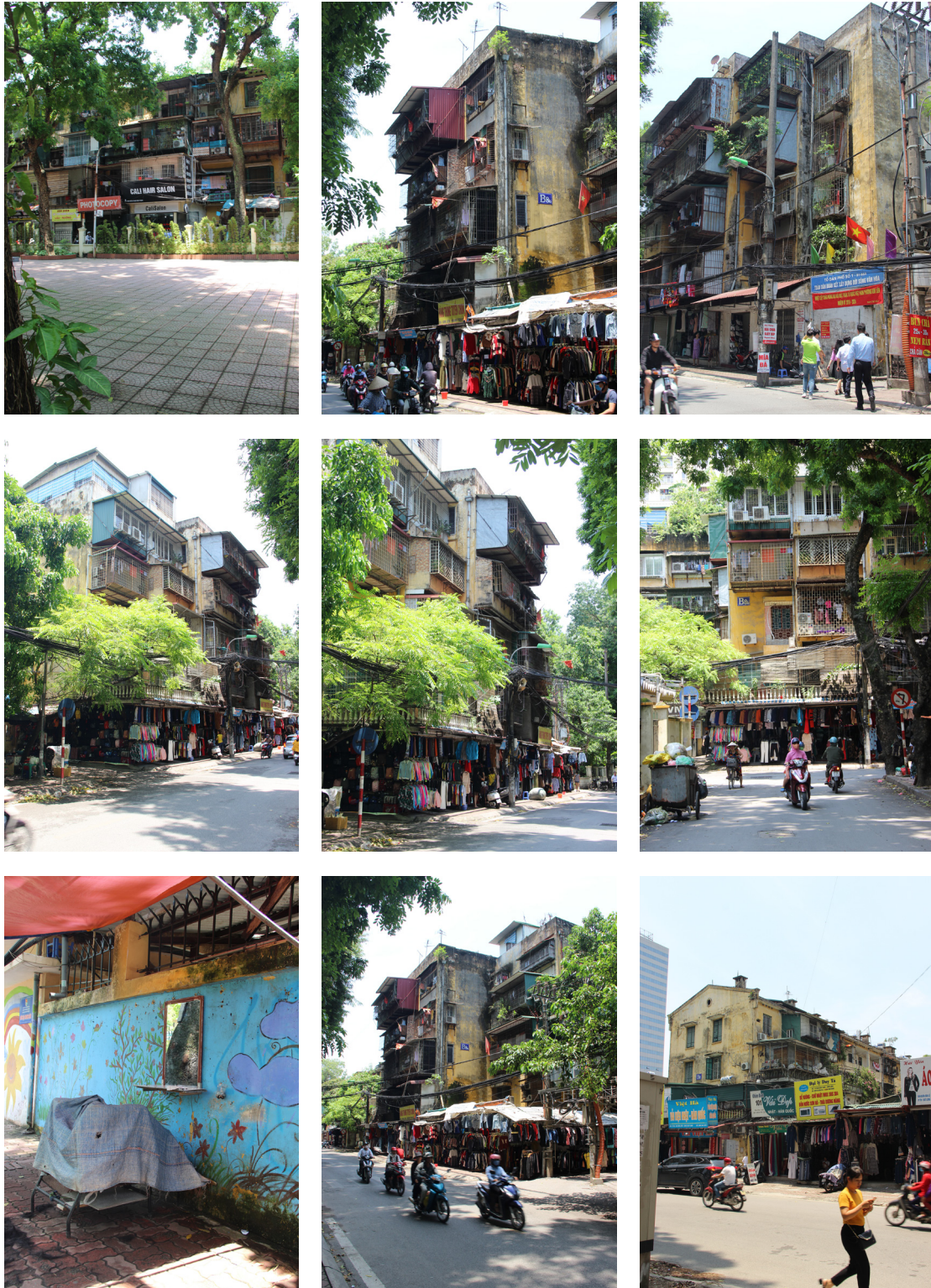


Fig. 286. Public spaces inside the KTT in Kiem Lien, Hanoi. Source: author, 2019.



Fig. 287. Public spaces between the blocks of KTT Thanh Xuân Bắc. Source: author, 2019.



Fig. 290. Public spaces inside the KTT in Thanh Xuân Bắc, Hanoi. Source: author, 2019.



Fig. 288. Public spaces inside the KTT in Bắc Thành Công, Hanoi. Source: author, 2019.



Fig. 289. Public spaces inside the KTT in Bắc Thành Công, Hanoi. Source: author, 2019.



Fig. 291.
Neon billboards in
Nathan Road, Hong
Kong. Source: author,
2008.

5.2.3 Preserving the Neon Life¹

The use of neon signs in Hong Kong became widespread as a result of its rapid post-war economic growth. They had been patented by Georges Claude in France in 1915 and adopted shortly thereafter in the US by a Los Angeles car dealership. Over the following decades, the growth of the tourism and entertainment industry spurred the widespread adoption of neon lamps on road signs and highway signs.² In Hong Kong, as a capitalist outpost on China's doorstep, the twinkling signs of its sophisticated shops and restaurants not only appealed, as Chan Shao-Yi points out, to consumers' desires but served to subtly glorify the supposed superiority of Western capitalism over Chinese communism.³ Hong Kong's neon exuberance reflected its economic dynamism as an open international port, as well as its status as an oasis of civilization in Asia, a familiar airy base camp that stood between the vastness of Communist China and the relaxed exoticism of Southeast Asian countries. From the 1960s onwards, however, the decline of the US *downtowns* led to the progressive stigmatization of neon, becoming increasingly associated with reprehensible nocturnal activities⁴ that were especially notorious in neighborhoods characterized by high ratios of Asian-American migrants. Today neon lights

1 This section is fundamentally based on the article by the author 'The Death and Life of Hong Kong Illegal Facades'. *Arena Journal of Architecture Research* 5 (1).

2 Jennifer Joy Elacio Cagasan, 'A Methodology For Preserving Las Vegas Neon Electric Displays' (Columbia University, 2012), p. 7.

3 Shao-Yi Chan, p. 153.

4 Kristina Davis, 'Neon Light Fetish: Neon Art and Signification of Sex Work', *Visual Culture & Gender*, 12 (2017), 17–28 (p. 20).



Fig. 292.
Exterior of gambling hall with illuminated board flashing winning numbers. Jack Birns, 1949. Source: Life Magazine.

have become obsolete;⁵ LED ('light emitting diode') lamps offer better energy efficiency, are more versatile in their malleability and require less maintenance. The transformation of Hong Kong, initially an industrial enclave supported by cheap labour, into a post-industrial financial centre was accompanied by changes in the lighting of advertising media.

The high-rise buildings and canyon-roads resulting from Hong Kong's densification can be seen as a revealing materialization of conflicting forces: West and East, communism and capitalism, misery and wealth, humanity and technology; places where fascination and silenced desires are vividly communicated through the lights of the city. Once arrived at post-industrial civilization, neon signs are seen as a 'transnational' vehicle for the communication of 'archaic modernities', 'multiple overlapping temporalities' or 'uchronies' where mythology and modernity coexist.

The more Hong Kong clears itself of these informal structures, and the more the reunification process moves towards a convergence with China, however bitterly contested, then such signs and embedded lights will be seen as flagships of the city's urban identity. It is a conundrum that has also confronted other capitalist cities. Elacio Cagasan, who proposed a set of preservation guidelines for the Neon Museum in Las Vegas, noted three main vectors of cultural value in neon signs: manual labour, typically executed by local small businesses, implying a close connection between the maker and the community; self-representation, in witnessing their own rise, success, and demise; and finally, collective history, in the sense of being testimonies to places and businesses that have or have had a somehow significant role in their environment.⁶

As mentioned, the emergence of LED technologies has led to the replacement of neon in favour of newer, more versatile systems that allow for more intricate designs because LED strip lamps can be easily bent, as well as being much more

⁵ Lui, p. 107.

⁶ Cagasan, p. 43.



Fig. 293.
Cluster of neon billboards in Nathan
Road, Hong Kong. Source: author, 2008.



Fig. 294.
Cluster of neon billboards in Nathan
Road, Hong Kong. Source: author, 2008.



Fig. 295.
Cluster of neon billboards in Nathan
Road, Hong Kong. Source: author, 2008.



Fig. 296.
An operator manually crafts a commercial neon sign, 2019, Hong Kong. Source: Street Sign Hong Kong.

energy efficient. Artist Teddy Lo, in his book *LED Planet* (2015), interviews a wide range of lighting industry players, including LED manufacturers, curators, event organizers, art directors, and experimental designers.⁷ Teddy Lo covers virtually all feasible fields of development in the short term and also studies the most promising solutions available, making it difficult to dispute Lo's optimistic view of the advantages of LED technology over neon.⁸ While focusing on an international multicultural approach, Lo's art installations *Phaeodaria* (2008) refers specifically to Hong Kong, while *Shades Dynamicism* (2015) adheres to similar principles of organic fluidity and data flows evoking on Zaha Hadid parametric flows (fig. 297, 298). LED lighting should thus be understood as the natural development of Hong Kong, today connected to 5G, Bluetooth and Wi-Fi networks to make use of the 'underlying energy and information flowing through the heart of Hong Kong whose lighting devices are programmed to react to invisible frequencies and radiation'.⁹ Teddy Lo even goes on to speculate that, just as information is now projected on large outdoor screens, much smaller LED projections could be made in a much more personalized way, carrying user-level information on elements such as handrails or doorknobs in homes. Given the technical advantages and the adoption of LED technologies by all large retail outlets as well as urban advertisers, the only area that would still have room for neon lighting would be the *mom-and-pop* stores where retail signage is still physically located closer to pedestrians. Some commercial start-ups, such as Amazing Neon HK (established in 2020), cater to a renewed interest in the *vintage* appeal of neon lights while taking full advantage of LED technologies. Mak and Fung see a clear analogy in the relationship between these two lighting techniques and previous battles for technological supremacy: vinyl versus CD versus mp3 versus streaming. Or paper books versus e-books; the older formats are not necessarily obsolete and it is reasonable to expect that a niche market will remain for them.¹⁰

7 Teddy Lo, *Planet LED: A New Spectral Paradigm* (ORO Editions, 2013).

8 James King, 'LED Evangelist Teddy Lo Combines Art and Commerce in Real World', *South China Morning Post*, 2014 <<https://www.scmp.com/property/hong-kong-china/article/1588789/led-evangelist-teddy-lo-combines-art-and-commerce-real>> [accessed 12 May 2021].

9 Teddy Lo, 'Teddy Lo', 2019 <<https://www.teddylo.tv/>> [accessed 28 April 2021].

10 Mak and Fung.

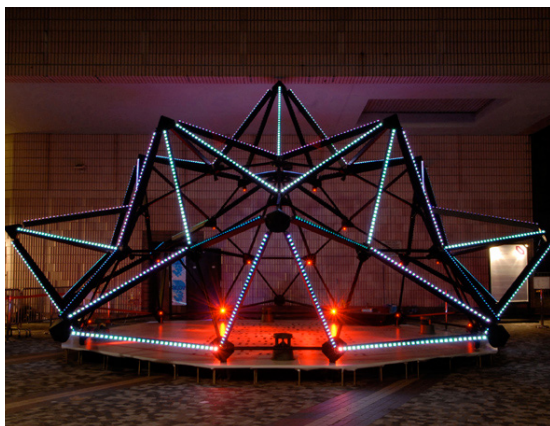


Fig. 297. Teddy Lo, *Phaeodaria*, 2008. Source: Teddy Lo.



Fig. 298. Teddy Lo, *Shades+Dynamicism*, 2012. Source: Teddy Lo.

LED light signs lack the complexity of the spatial layering that comes with the manufacture of hand-moulded neon tubes. Due to their design architecture LEDs need to project their light unidirectionally regardless of their spatial arrangement, whereas neon tubes emit light across the entire circumference of the lamp. This, together with the reflections coming from the bottom surface of the sign, creates a unique aura specific to neon lights that cannot yet be achieved with LEDs.

The heritage value of neon signs thus transcends their mere aesthetic appeal, lying rather at the intersection between artisanal tradition and collective memories. Leung me-Ping's *I Miss Fanta* (2012) is an installation that reuses the typical Coca Cola neon sign that for decades could be seen at the intersection between Almeida Ribeiro Avenue and Leal Senado Square in Macau. This billboard had become an eminent icon in Macau's urban landscape. Interestingly, its first known photographic representation was at a pro-communist demonstration during the 1967 riots which culminated, unlike in Hong Kong, in the colonial authorities publicly acknowledging the supremacy of mainland China. This sign, which had been destined to be uninstalled due to security concerns, was dismantled and then temporarily displayed by the M+ Museum in a public square in Yau Ma Tei in Hong Kong (fig. 299, 300).

In 2014, Lau Wan, a technician at Nam Wah Neon Light & Electrical Manufactory Ltd, donated to the archives of the West Kowloon Cultural District a large selection of sketches and templates for neon signs that his company had manufactured since its inception in 1953. The conjunction of manual tailoring, local *know-how* (including design, calligraphy and bulb making) and the aesthetic values that make Hong Kong's streets unique have also been brought together in contemporary artworks such as *Electroprobe Installation #2 - Magnetic Guangzhou* (2007) by the Troika collective and *Generate Electricity* (2007) by Xin Yun-Peng. Subsequently, in 2015, the M+ Museum presented an online exhibition entitled *Mobile M+: NEON SIGNS*.



Fig. 299.
Leung Mee-Ping, *I Miss Fanta*, 2012. Source: Leung Mee-Ping.



Fig. 300.
(Left) Photograph of pro-communist demonstration in Macau in 1967 where the Coca-Cola billboard appears already in place. Unknown photograph. Source: Leung Mee-Ping, *I Miss Fanta*, 2012. (Right) The same billboard in Sam Ma Lou.

HK, curated by Aric Chen, Chloe Chow, Kingsley Jayasekera and Gloria Wong, which included a geopositioned mapping of the most notable surviving neon signs.¹¹

In 2017, the 'Hong Kong Neon Heritage Group' would be established. The international media also began to pay attention to the gradual cleaning up of Hong Kong's facades, interviewing neon sign makers such as Wu Chi-Kai and Brian Kwok, who described how their industry changed from the days of 'anything goes' real estate and virtual absence of regulation to the current hyper-vigilant and controlled urban situation.¹²

More recently, the 'Street Sign HK' collective was founded by Kevin Mak and Ken Fung in 2018 to advocate for the preservation of Hong Kong's urban signage as cultural heritage and so was featured at the *London Architecture Festival* in 2019. When asked about the challenge of preserving city signs without compromising their authenticity as a living cultural practice, Mak and Fung noted: 'We rarely see signs as individual works of art. We believe they belong to the streets: keeping a demolished poster away from its context is always a last resort. The best museum

11 Littleghost, 'Poems Praising the Past - Reading Stella So's Illustrations and Animations', *Para-Site*, Summer (2005), 40–45.
12 Fernández; Johnny Wharris, 'The Decline of Hong Kong's Iconic Neon Glow', *Vox*, 2018 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DdpEYzvi8pI>> [accessed 10 April 2021].



Fig. 301. Some surviving, non-compliant neon billboards in Kowloon in postwar buildings. Source: author, 2019.

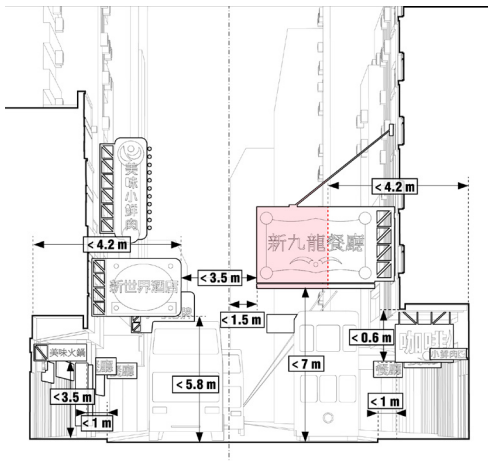


Fig. 302. Diagram explaining the rules for permitted billboard dimensions according to the Buildings Department. Source: author, based on the BD explanative brochures.

would be the streets themselves, where the posters are historically, culturally or aesthetically significant'.¹³ As an alternative, Mak and Fung propose a regulatory approach, in the form of 'new conservation guidelines', which would go beyond the current standards based solely on dimensions and load-bearing structure. Until now, old signs have been destined to be torn down if they exceed certain sizes, regardless of how well they are maintained, and certifications of previous structural records are very difficult to obtain. Therefore, 'Street Sign HK' advocates for a 'mechanism where the value of old signs, at the request of shop owners, can be assessed individually, similar to historic sites', and therefore believe that old neon signs and new LED creations could find their rightful place in the urban landscape as part of the confluence between market forces and cultural heritage preservation.

13 Mak and Fung.

