EXPLORING DESIGN POTENTIALS IN POROUS URBAN SPACE: SPLIT VISION URBANISM HK THROUGH MONTAGE

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ABSTRACT

Split Vision Urbanism HK is a design research project located at the intersection of urban governance, architectural design, and media arts. It seeks to critically address the relationship between formal and informal structures in order to uncover the hidden potentials of porous urban space, extracting new territories for design practices to engage the generative aspects of high density. Drawing on landscape urbanism's critique on conventional urban planning, the project builds upon the tradition of exploring the potentials of places and spaces in urban culture through movement. The objective of *Split Vision Urbanism HK* is to detect, analyze, and evaluate the typological qualities of porous urban space, constructing a scenario framework for design intervention in high density. The project defines porous urban space as a spatial typology which tends to proliferate on an informal basis in high density, producing an interiorized environment of rhizomatic multiplicities that conflate the disciplinary differences between architecture and urbanism. Drawing on the hypothesis that porous urban space holds unexplored potentials for generative design practices, the project takes a series of city blocks located in Hong Kong's Mong Kok district as subject matter of analysis to postulate a critique on the urban renewal processes that currently transforms Mong Kok from a porous and complex construct towards a deterministic constellation of figures and grounds. As urban renewal is orchestrated through the agencies that govern public space, low frequency recording of the discrepancies between the informal and the formal reveal differentiations between the outside and the inside of a city block. This split vision urbanism unfolds a territory for experimentation, where inconsistencies between formalized routines and site-specific potentials can be detected through audio-visual recording, and processed through literature reviews and design experiments. Examining the intersection between collage and montage for data collection and visualization, the project explores combinations of quantitative and qualitative data to extrapolate the complexities of porous urban space.

BACKGROUND

Split Vision Urbanism HK is a design research project that seeks to explore the typological qualities of porous urban space through experimental combinations of quantitative and qualitative data. The project is headed by Per-Johan Dahl, architect and researcher, with Caroline Dahl, urbanist and researcher; Peter Palvén, media artist and engineer; Hannah Marschall, landscape architect; and Kit Wai Chan Geoff, M.Arch. student at CITA at KADK.

Working from this interdisciplinary research platform, *Split Vision Urbanism HK* refers to porous urban space as a spatial typology, one that tends to proliferate at the intersection between formal and informal structures in high density. The project takes a series of city blocks in Hong Kong's Mong Kok area as subject matter of analysis. Drawing on the research of the Greek scholar Stavros Stavrides on porous urban space, the project frames the alleyway as an agent of urban porosity in Mong Kok.[1]

Stavrides's scholarship on porous urban space has proven useful when analyzing Mong Kok's alleyways. Building on Walter Benjamin's interest in public behavior and spatial experience, Stavrides compares urban porosity with the mediating qualities of threshold space. Recognizing the ephemeral qualities of such space, he utilizes Michel Foucault's heterotopia to confine urban porosity as other-places within 'their surrounding spaces of normality […] being simultaneously connected to and separated from the places from which they differ.'[2] By extrapolating Mong Kok's alleyways through Stavrides's scholarship, *Split Vision Urbanism HK* defines porosity as a public interiorized urban environment of rhizomatic multiplicities; one that conflates the disciplinary differences between architecture and urbanism.

While *Split Vision Urbanism HK* is primarily interested in exploring the typological qualities of porous urban space, it additionally postulates a critique on the urban renewal processes that currently transforms Mong Kok from a porous and complex construct towards a deterministic constellation of figures and grounds. By reconceptualizing Mong Kok's alleyways, from a dilapidated place to a generative space, the project strives to reveal some hidden potentials in the porous urban space typology, which may have impact on how such space is perceived in contemporary discourse and debate. (Figure 1.)

DISCURSIVE REFERENCES TO LANDSCAPE URBANISM

Recognizing the theme of the conference, *Split Vision Urbanism HK* did not emerge as a specific inquiry into landscape urbanist theory and practice. The project is instead contextualized in a general interest in urban conditions and characteristics, as well as in a commitment to utilize design disciplines when investigating means of intervention within those conditions.
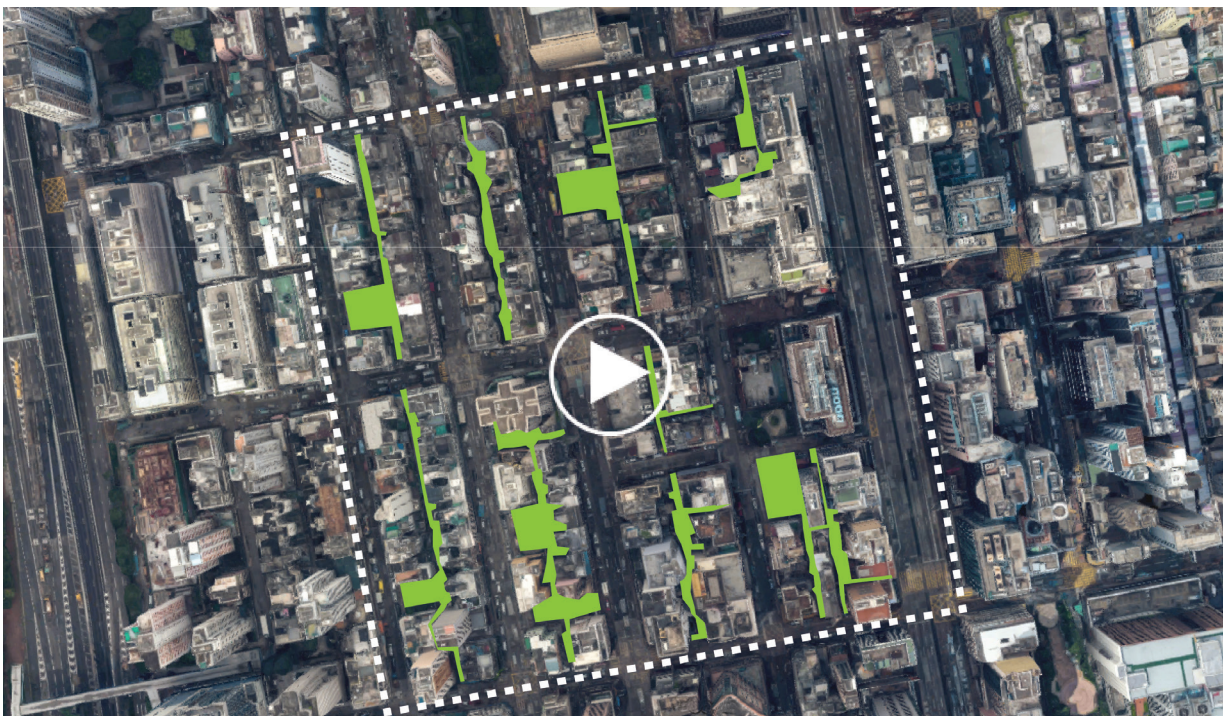

FIGURE 1: Mapping porous urban space in Mong Kok, Hong Kong. (Illustration by Per-Johan Dahl)

The project argues, however, that the research constellation adheres to the discursive context of landscape urbanism, as formulated by Charles Waldheim. In his latest book, *Landscapes of Urbanism*, Waldheim clarifies that landscape urbanism is a discourse that evolved at the close of the twentieth century 'to occupy a void created by urban planning's shift toward a social-science model and away from physical design […], as urban design committed to neotraditional models of town planning.'[3] Recognizing landscape urbanism as a discourse within the urban design discipline that challenges neotraditional tendencies and directions, it may be fair to argue that *Split Vision Urbanism HK* adheres to the discursive context of landscape urbanism.

The project's interest in the design disciplines draws on a conviction that progressive architectural culture is more relevant for research into complex urban conditions, than modernist planning tradition. Thus *Split Vision Urbanism HK* adheres to landscape urbanism's critique on the efficiency of planning in contemporary urban development, which has been articulated as a core position by landscape urbanist scholars such as Mohen Mostafavi, Charles Waldheim, and James Corner.[4] Corner, for example, is explicit when he clarifies that landscape urbanism 'can be seen as a response to the failure of traditional urban design and planning to operate effectively in the contemporary city.'[5] Landscape urbanism is certainly not the first context in which such a critique has been postulated. The inability of modernist planning to respond to complex urban conditions has been widely articulated in design disciplines, at least since Voorhees, Walker, Smith & Smith published their report in 1958.[6] But it may be fair to argue that the landscape urbanism discourse is, today, one of the most vocal protagonists in such critique.

Due to the project's enquiries into Hong Kong urban space, *Split Vision Urbanism HK* adheres to a critique of the landscape urbanism discourse. The "landscape" in landscape urbanist theory commonly invokes the horizontal field as a model for use when thinking through, or acting upon, the contemporary urban condition. From Stan Allen's 'Thick 2-D' to Mohen Mostafavi's 'surface [of] new and unexpected events,' and Charles Waldheim's sprawling shape of brownfields and infrastructures, landscape urbanism has propelled a discourse where the city is frequently perceived as a horizontal organization of complexities, or as Waldheim says, a 'horizontal field of urban operations.'[7] Such horizontality has commonly been problematized with reference to the American city.

But Hong Kong demonstrates a completely different mode of urbanity. Hong Kong is a vertical agglomeration of disparate occurrences, which bear few organizational similarities to the American city. The social and cultural relationship to the ground, for example, differs radically in Hong Kong, which prompts new ways of navigating the city. And the commercial and administrative structures of Hong Kong have fully embraced the instant flux of neoliberal economies as a primary mode of materializing urban form, which has prompted a development procedure that abolishes most conventional relationships between state and industry. Hence, *Split Vision Urbanism HK* adheres to the critique on the dominance of Anglo-American references in landscape urbanism discourse, which has been articulated by, for example, Lisa Diedrich.[8] The project is therefore interested in investigating the landscape urbanist discourse's aptitude of rendering efficient scholarship beyond horizontal urbanity, to include also the vertical.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

When looking for radical verticality, Hong Kong's Mong Kok area seems like the perfect match. Mong Kok is an area in the Yau Tsim Mong District of Kowloon, Hong Kong. With a population density that is more than five times that of Manhattan, the area is often listed as one of the most intense urban areas in the world.[9] A fishing village during the nineteenth century, Mong Kok developed rapidly from the 1910s, when a new ferry pier created regular route between Hong Kong Island and Mong Kok. The influx of people and businesses escalated during the first half of the twentieth century. Reclamation and development projects from the 1920s to the '50s reshaped the coastline and added new land to host the booming population. Mong Kok's gridiron, which

FIGURE 2: Typical photo collage method. (Illustration by Per-Johan Dahl)

expands through the south bounding Ya Ma Tei and into the older parts of Tsim Tsa Tsui, where it morphs into an organic street network, testifies to the rather recent development of Mong Kok.

Mong Kok is characterized by a mixture of old and new multi-story buildings, with shops and restaurants at street level, and commercial or residential uses above. The size and expression of Mong Kok's buildings stand in stark contrast to the homogenous grid, which serves as the organizing principle for the blocks. Heights and plot ratios vary. Some buildings occupy half a block, while others are less than five meters wide. As building details and signage have been implemented ad-hoc – often illegally – the tectonics of Mong Kok correlate with the extreme population density to create a hyper-intense visual and sensorial experience.

Mong Kok is administrated through Hong Kong's statutory planning system, which controls planning objectives and verifies safety measures. The alleyways in Mong Kok derive from this regulatory system, where they have been inserted to provide a second means of egress from tall buildings. Slicing the rectangular blocks in longitudinal directions, they establish a regulated space which tends to be occupied informally. The alleyways provide alternative means of storage and commerce, while facilitating cross-ventilation and backlight for the small storefronts. They conflate dubious uses, such as prostitution and drug dealing, with community activities, such as lottery and trash recycling, to usher a programmatic intricacy beyond any zoning control. These merely informal appropriations of Mong Kok's alleyways give rise to a space that challenges the conventional dichotomy of public and private, while catalyzing a complex configuration of continuity, performance, and excess.

FIGURE 3: Time laps of motion graphics *Split Vision Urbanism HK*. (Illustration by Per-Johan Dahl)

The intricate – sort of cleftish – space of Mong Kok's alleyways stands in stark contrast to the surrounding public space, which has been organized by the grid. When the alley space pierces through the surrounding building mass to reach the regulated city, it conflates specificities in tectonics, culture, and detail to produce a series of threshold spaces that, referring to Stavrides's scholarship, both connects and separates. And it is exactly this intersection between formal regulation and informal action that has generated Mong Kok's porous urban space. The research approach has therefore been to record the discrepancies between the formal and the informal, revealing differentiations between the outside and inside of the Mong Kok urban block. This split vision urbanism unfolds a territory for experimentation, where inconsistencies between formalized routines and site-specific potentials can be detected through audio-visual recording, and processed through literary references and design experiments.

MONTAGE

As previously mentioned, *Split Vision Urbanism HK* is interested in piloting a research process through experimental combinations of quantitative and qualitative data. The project is interested in data collection beyond empiricism, and believes that new approaches on data collection, dissemination, and assessment are essential for supporting visionary prospects. To activate such research, the project draws on Michel de Certeau's call for 'traverse tactics' in direct observations of urban conditions. [10]

While most enquiries into urban space typology are pursued through visual and textual data, *Split Vision Urbanism HK* introduces a layer of sensorial variation through audial data. Using sound, the project seeks to expand the experiential qualities of the research topic, while still articulating its interdisciplinary character. Data is thus collected through combinations of audio recording and photography. The photographic approach adheres to the disciplinary heritage of single-point perspective. When processed through photo collage technique, the perspective space is transformed into a rhizomatic realism that conflates the dichotomies of sky/ground, private/public, vertical/horizontal, and outside/inside. (Figure 2.)

For the representation of Mong Kok's porous urban space, *Split Vision Urbanism HK* utilizes animation software as a platform for data evaluation and representation. (Figure 3.) The decision to instigate representation through animation software correlates with the general philosophy of the project, which is to explore the potentials of places and spaces in urban culture through movement. The theoretical framework for representation was formulated with reference to the montage technique. Utilizing animation software to examine the intersection between photo collage and montage, the project explores what Charles Waldheim refers to as 'time-based media capable of reconciling the historic demands of landscape representation with contemporary visual culture and digital media.'[11]

The montage is a technique that oscillates between visuality and materiality in representation. Montage was introduced to architecture, cinema, and the visual arts during the early twentieth century. While montage in architecture and cinema is contextualized in August Choisy's examination of the Acropolis, montage in the visual arts derives from the Berlin Dadaist's experiments of introducing photography into their works.[12] British art historian Dawn Ades tells us that 'Dada montage was invented […] within the context of, although in opposition to, collage [and that the] name was chosen, clearly, to distance the two activities.'[13] In her scholarship, Ades refers to two essays from the French poet Louis Aragon where he discusses the differences between collage and montage. In the essays, Aragon state that collages 'have the value of a test, an instrument of control of the reality of itself of the picture [while the montage is] prophetic of the direction it is to take [thus] the thing expressed [in montage] is more important than the manner of expressing it.'[14]

The capacity of montage to infiltrate the mere pictorial representation of reality with its meaning was achieved, as Rosalina Krauss states, 'through juxtaposition: of image with image, or image with drawing, or image with text.'[15] Functioning as a field of operation, montage can be discussed as a technique for spatial inquiries where multiple representation tools coalesce to render what Walter Benjamin discusses as 'antinomies of the allegorical […] where any person, any object, any relationship can mean anything else.'[16] Drawing on Benjamin, *Split Vision Urbanism HK* interprets the montage as a technique that vacillates between a holistic protocol and a fragmented assemblage of differentiations. As such it becomes useful when consolidating research methods and variables whose disparate techniques and scholastic cultures seek to render them incompatible. Rodolphe el-Khoury says that 'montage denotes a kind of *bricolage*, a reorganization of existing material and codes.'[17] And it is exactly through the virtue of surpassing the limitations of dichotomy that the montage technique can be revitalized and activated in contemporary research context. At *Split Vision Urbanism HK*, such capacity instigates a research environment where pictorial, audial, and textual data are collected and assembled in multifaceted ways.

CONCLUSIONS

Split Vision Urbanism HK is an on-going design research project, thus the exhibition at the *Beyond Ism* conference at Alnarp does not represent an end result, but rather the first evaluation of research findings. The project did not emanate from a certain set of research questions, which encompasses a mere conventional way of framing empirical enquiries. The project is rather contextualized in a general fascination about a specific spatial condition, and curiosity about disciplinary affiliations and hidden potentials. The first approach of *Split Vision Urbanism HK* has therefore been to orchestrate a research process that facilitates the collection and processing of both quantitative and qualitative data. We do agree that quantitative and empirical data is imperative for research on urban space phenomena, but we also argue that qualitative and speculative data is crucial for any researcher interested in extrapolating prospects for future design potentials.

While Mong Kok frames the area of inquiry, the porous urban space discourse is not limited to Asian cities. Walter Benjamin explored urban porosity in Naples, and Stavros Satavrides in Athens. Thus scholarship has been developed in European context, which suggests universal configurations. Data collection in porous urban space, however, requires innovation in method.

The conventional tools of diagram and drawing are tricky to use because the detail tends to be of equal importance as the total, and the relationships that ever since Nolli have guided urban analysis through two dimensional representations are not necessarily applicable in porous urban space. The collection of empirical data is equally problematic, because the informal, often illegal, activities that often thrive in porous urban space resists representation through conventional data. *Split Vision Urbanism HK* explores the montage as a data collection technique feasible to combine quantitative and qualitative inquiries in porous urban space. Despite operating beyond the conventions of drawing, montage additionally interconnects the second and the fourth dimensions in space analysis, which assist the project's objective to combine the detail and the total when exploring the potentials of places and spaces in urban culture through movement. To improve data on the cultural specificities and design potentials in porous urban space, the montage impetus may incorporate on-site construction that renders social interaction through design.[18] Such expanded method would be beneficial for academic researchers as well as for design professionals, city administration, and the community.

ENDNOTES

1. Stavros Stavrides, "Heterotopias and the Experience of Porous Urban Space," in *Loos Space: Possibility and Diversity in Urban Life*, ed. Karen A. Franck and Quentin Stevens (New York: Routledge, 2007).

2. "Heterotopias and the Experience of Porous Urban Space," in *Loos Space: Possibility and Diversity in Urban Life*, ed. Karen A. Franck and Quentin Stevens (New York: Routledge, 2007), 4.

3. Charles Waldheim, *Landscape as Urbanism: A General Theory* (New York: Princeton University Press, 2016), 4.

4. Read about Mohen Mostafavi's critique on conventional planning tools and techniques, such as the master plan and zoning, in Mohen Mostafavi, "Landscapes of Urbanism," in *Landscape Urbanism: A Manual for the Machinic Landscape*, ed. Mohen Mostafavi and Ciro Najle (London: AA Publications, 3003). Charles Waldheim's critique is articulated in, for example, Waldheim, *Landscape as Urbanism: A General Theory*. For James Corner's critique on "the rigid mechanisms of centralized planning," see James Corner, "Terra Fluxus," in *The Landscape Urbanism Reader*, ed. Charles Waldheim (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2005).

5. "Landscape Urbanism," in *Landscape Urbanism: A Manual for the Machinic Landscape*, ed. Mohen Mostafavi and Ciro Najle (London: AA Publications, 2003), 58-59.

6. Voorhees Walker Smith & Smith, *Zoning New York City: A Proposal for a Zoning Resolution for the City of New York* (New York: City Planning Commission, 1958).

7. For Stan Allen's scholarship read, for example, Stan Allen, "Mat Urbanism: The Thick 2-D," in *Case: Le Corbusier's Venice Hospital*, ed. Hashim Sarkis (Munich: Prestel/Harvard Design School, 2002). For Mohen Mostafavi's scholarship read, for example, Mohsen Mostafavi, "Landscapes of Urbanism," in *Landscape Urbanism: A Manual for the Machinic Landscape*, ed. Mohsen Mostafavi and Ciro Najle (London: AA Publications, 2003). For Charles Walheim's scholarship read, for example, Charles Waldheim, "Landscape as Urbanism," in *The Landscape Urbanism Reader*, ed. Charles Waldheim (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2006).

8. Lisa Diedrich recognizes Thomas Sieverts's book *Zwischenstadt*, which "found its way into the North American urban-development debate with the concept of 'landscape urbanism'." Diedrich distinguishes between European and American discourse, arguing that "in Europe the development of the city from its landscape is a longstanding practice in landscape architecture." See Lisa Diedrich, "Landscape-Oriented!," in *On Site: Landscape Architecture Europe*, ed. Landscape Architecture Europe Foundation (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2009).

9. The population density in Manhattan is 66,940 people per square mile (25,846/km²), see U.S. Census Bureau. The population density in Mong Kok is 130,000/km², see Rory Boland, "Welcome to Mongkok - Officially the Busiest Place on the Planet," About Travel, http://gohongkong.about.com/od/whattoseeinhk/ss/MongkokLadiesMa.htm#showall.

10. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 29.

11. Charles Waldheim, "Provisional Notes on Landscape Representation and Digital Media," in *Landscape, Vision, Motion: Visual Thinking in Landscape Culture*, ed. Christophe Girot and Fred Truniger (Berlin: Jovis, 2012), 22.

12. For montage in architecture and cinema, see for example, Yve-Alain Bois and Michael Glenny, "Sergei M. Eisenstein: Montage and Architecture," *Assemblage*, no. 10 (December, 1989). For montage in the visual arts, see, for example,

Dawn Ades, *Photomontage*, World of Art (New York: Thames and Hudson Inc., 1996).

13. *Photomontage*, 15.

14. Ibid.

15. Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1985), 103.

16. Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (New York: Verso, 1998), 174-75.

17. Rodolphe el-Khoury, "Paradoxical Seams," in *Unprecedented Realism: The Architecture of Machado and Silvetti*, ed. K. Michael Hays (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1995), 95.

18. Such data collection initiative may follow RIEAch precedent. See, for example, Per-Johan Dahl, "ZHUuGROUND14: Critical Skills and Social Interaction at CityU," HKIA Journal, no. 69 (2014).

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