

Cellphilm Fieldnote
Freedom and Space: Conflict or Convergence?

Date: 13th November, 2016 (Sunday)

Time: 3:30 p.m. to 6:00 p.m.

Space: Wan Chai District (Lee Tung Avenue and Tai Yuen Street)

Observations & Photos

This fieldnote reports the dynamic interplay between freedom and space in our repetitive and unconscious everyday life from the comparative perspectives of top-down strategies and bottom-up tactics as exhibited in Lee Tung Avenue (henceforth LTA) and Tai Yuen Street (henceforth TYS) respectively (Certeau, 1988; Lefebvre, 2000).¹

Environmentally speaking, various cold static bronze statues, high-class restaurants and shops, landscaped areas, pedestrianised boulevards, and modern-styled Western architectures are scattered around the newly commodified and gentrified LTA. Different triumphant moving street parades, and fragrant foie gras and wine tasting events attract a large crowd. However, the localised Tai Yuen Street are packed with multifarious warm small-scale family businesses like selling clothing, food, flowers, and toys and models, surrounded by different multi-national brands and skyscrapers in all the compass directions. Interestingly, more diversified visitors are found when compared to LTA, especially foreigners, the elderly and small families. Without a clean, empty and neat condition as LTA, TYS are congested and disordered with numerous uncertain shop front extensions (see **Figures 1 and 2**).



Figure 1 (Left): The Long Queue of Westernised Foie Gras and Wine Tasting in LTA

Figure 2 (Right): The Packed Products of Localised Small-Scale Shops in TYS

¹ Certeau, M. D. (1988). *The practice of everyday life*. Trans. Steven Rendall. Berkeley: University of California Press.; Lefebvre, H. (2000). *Everyday life in the modern world*. A&C Black.

Both the freedom level and space functions are sharply delineated in these two geographically proximate but socially different spaces. In LTA, negative constraints like regular patrolling security guards, continuous surveillance of close-circuit televisions (henceforth CCTVs) and strict prohibition of activities like dancing and singing are introduced to interfere and regulate the public behaviours (see **Figure 3**). For the visually inaccessible and inconvenient fifth-floor public “secret garden”, the negative freedom of the elderly and pregnant women are further reduced due to its design of long stairs, occasionally functioning lift and poor entrances (see **Figure 4**). The European-styled garden is packed with abundant dysfunctional visual features like small angles and pumpkin cars sculptures, which further lower the negative freedom for public space usage (see **Figure 5**) (Gray, 1980; MacCallum, 1967).²



Figure 3: The Overspread Monitoring by CCTVs and Security Guards in LTA



Figure 4 (Left): The Inaccessible and Inconvenient Entrance of Secret Garden in LTA



Figure 5 (Right): The Dysfunctional Visual Features of Secret Garden in LTA

² Gray, J. N. (1980). On negative and positive liberty. *Political Studies*, 28(4), 507-526.; MacCallum, G. C. (1967). Negative and positive freedom. *The Philosophical Review*, 312-334.

All user-unfriendly facilities in LTA are emerged after signing the public-private Deeds of Dedication, whereas the property developers fulfill its responsibility merely in exchange for higher plot ratio and greater total floor area from the Government without considering how to shape the public space with comfort and high plasticity (Cuthbert & McKinnell, 2001; Luk, 2009).³ Despite some minimal negative restrictions are necessary for maintaining public order, these overwhelming limitations are criticised as different trade-offs inside an interdependent society. The positive freedom of the dominant property developers in profit-maximisation under easier administrative management is satisfied at the expense of the negative freedom of subservient local inhabitants for their usage in this privately-owned public space, let alone mentioning whether the public can really benefit from these economic prosperities eventually (Berlin, 1958; Heyman, 1992).⁴

Interestingly, negative constraints are also observed in TYS when different stores are extending their shop fronts horizontally under the keen space competition, which impose negative restraints on the environmental hygiene, road access and safety, and the overall quality of life. Despite this seems violating the principle of “leaving-a-route-for-pedestrian-to-pass-through” by the Town Planning Board explicitly at first, the community bond is strengthened through closer face-to-face interaction. The local inhabitants are empowered with the capability and capacity as positive freedom to reconstruct, reterritorialise, rebuild, re-establish and reorder their limited spaces into more liveable places after considering their individual desires, needs and preferences. The restaurant owners put more chairs and tables for accommodating more customers in limited space effectively and efficiently while the flower shop owners display their plants on the street for receiving more sunlight and ventilation under the intense wall effect (see **Figures 6 and 7**). Some even move their dining table and fitness equipments from their private home to the public space that blurs the conventional public-private boundaries under the unexpected and unpremeditated interactions (see **Figure 8**). The mixture of disorder and freedom under the dis-embedding and re-embedding of vernacular space is resulted.

³ Cuthbert, A. R., & McKinnell, K. G. (2001). Public domain, private interest – social space in Hong Kong. In *Public Places in Asia Pacific Cities* (pp. 191-211). Springer Netherlands.; Luk, W. L. (2009, November). Privately owned public space in Hong Kong and New York: The urban and spatial influence of the policy. In *The 4th International Conference of the International Forum on urbanism (IFoU)* (pp. 26-28).

⁴ Berlin, I. (1969). Two concepts of liberty. *Berlin, I*, 118-172.; Heyman, S. J. (1992). Positive and negative liberty. *Chi.-Kent L. Rev.*, 68, 81-90.



Figure 6 (Left): The Extension of Chairs and Tables of Restaurants in TYS

Figure 7 (Middle): The Exposure of Flowers and Plants on the Public Street in TYS

Figure 8 (Right): The Moving of Private Furniture to the Public Space in TYS

The diversified conceptualisation of freedom and space are further reflected from the reciprocal interviews with stakeholders. A 65-year-old elder claimed that LTA is the typical local supermarket-styled freedom with excessive consumerism, whereas the public are eluded by the Government of having high autonomy in choosing from the pool of diversified yet airy-fairy pre-supposed options. Instead TYS allows them to consume in a truly free manner with affordable financial abilities and strong personal desires over different down-to-earth traditional choices. Moreover, contradictions over the interpretation of public spaces are emerged under the inappropriate local mixed land use (Siu, 2010).⁵ Another 32-year-old official from the Wan Chai Commons claims that the Government believes that efficiency in public space usage can only be attained through respecting both the business-operation and land-use ordinances with ordered and organised spaces as in LTA while having the maximum amount of spaces as suggested by the shop owners in TYS. Likewise, conflicts are emerged under the different expectations over the environmental quality between the lower-class shop owners and middle-class local residents, whereas the former treat TYS as a packed family-business place while the latter regard it as the tranquil living space (see **Figures 9 and 10**).

⁵ Siu, K. W. (2010). "Regulation and Reception of Public Space in Hong Kong." *Transcultural Cities: Border-Crossing and Placemaking*, 285-298.

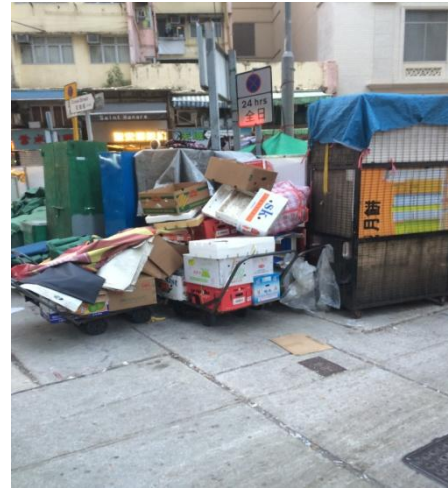


Figure 9 (Left): The Permanent Tidy Street with Unattended Public Spaces in LTA

Figure 10 (Right): The Temporary Messy Corner with Cardboards and Rubbish in TYS

The comparative case studies reflect that there is never the most appropriate way in perceiving both freedom and space when the differences are highly dependent on contexts like ages, identities and social classes (Simpson, 2001; Vogel, 2014).⁶ Individuals are never bound to be the passive un-freed readers under the dominant development-oriented regulatory approaches but as active actors and participants who possess the freedom and power to perceive, interpret and involve in conceptualising spaces into places with constant confrontations, conflicts and interactions through a people-oriented manner (Castells, 1983; Jacobs, 1961).⁷ However, it is lamentable to observe the inadequate community engagement in public space design as an unique neighborhood with compassion, creativity and humanity when the Government is focusing on addressing both the functional and objective goals with statistically perfect planning merely (Heywood, 2011; Hou, 2010; Platt, 2003).⁸ After all, the lived spaces but not perceived and conceived spaces are what individuals demanding (Lefebvre, 1991).⁹

⁶ Simpson, P. (2001). *Vices, virtues, and consequences: essays in moral and political philosophy*. CUA Press. 150-151.; Vogel, T. (2014). *Breakthrough Thinking: A Guide to Creative Thinking and Idea Generation*. 118-119.

⁷ Castells, M. (1983). *The city and the grassroots: a cross-cultural theory of urban social movements* (No.7). University of California Press.; Jacobs, J. (1961). *The death and life of great American cities*. Vintage.

⁸ Heywood, P. (2011). *Community planning: integrating social and physical environments*. John Wiley & Sons.; Hou, J. (Ed.). (2010). *Insurgent public space: guerrilla urbanism and the remaking of contemporary cities*. Routledge.; Platt, R. H. (2003). William Holly Whyte: Visionary for a Humane Metropolis. *Urban Planning Overseas*, 4, 007.

⁹ Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The production of space* (Vol. 142). Blackwell: Oxford.

Perceiving both freedom and space binarily seems to oversimplify and underestimate the ongoing heterogeneous involvement of different stakeholders. Instead of defining the subject matter of the ever-changing “space” with strategies conclusively, the crux is how various free human practices create and utilise the boundary, function and meaning of the socio-political space as adaptive and dynamic tactics to their everyday life (Elazar & Harvey, 2006).¹⁰

(Word Count: 1,000: Excluding Captions, Footnotes and References)

¹⁰ Elazar, D., & Harvey, D. (2006). Spaces of global capitalism: Towards a theory of uneven geographical development. 125-126.

References

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