



MY KIND OF TOWN

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Few cities evolve as rapidly as Hong Kong. Urban change is one of the characteristics that make it a stimulating place to live, but it means that some of the conditions that I enjoyed as a resident for two years in the mid-1990s now exist only as memories. The dramatic experience of flying across Western Kowloon and banking 45 degrees to starboard as the plane descended to the old Kai Tak airport was exceptional. Not only did you get an intimate view at low altitude of how people live at high density (at times seeing directly into their living rooms), but you then hit the runway surrounded by Victoria Harbour. Today the landing is less dangerous but the drama is still there in the awe-inspiring form of Foster & Partners' Chek Lap Kok, one of the world's largest and most advanced airports, and one on which I was lucky enough to work.

Most days, you can literally taste Hong Kong's rapid change in the air. It's the taste of dusty ground being carved and exposed, of massive structural joints being fused together and vast amounts of fuel being burned through. The making of architecture and place is permanently visible.

The city bears a passing resemblance to Fritz Lang's Metropolis; high-rise living is the norm, with the towers located over buzzing mixed-use plazas, themselves set above bustling transport hubs. It is polycentric urbanism turned though 90 degrees, a series of horizontally stacked mini-towns, each connected to the next. The residential tower grows out of a plastic shopping mall where men tout to tourists sheltering from the monsoon rain. Grimy lifts shudder against their shafts, transporting passengers upwards to receptions of clinical blinking light. Corridors burrow away from the humid courtyard air to windowless cells where occupants lie, eyes wide in the dark, planning their escape. Living spaces and kitchens are minimal, encouraging dining and socialising within the malls below, but with the option of escaping to the quiet tranquility of the 30th floor, or at weekends to the beaches of Stanley or Lamma Island.

These days, back in London, I have the pleasure of being able to walk to work, thankfully avoiding the crush of public transport. But Hong Kong is one of the few cities in which I can say I enjoyed commuting, in a twice-daily ritual crossing on the Star Ferry, between Tsim Sha Tsui on the Kowloon side and Wan Chai on Hong

Kong Island. The ferry is Hong Kong's equivalent to London's Routemaster bus, part of the fabric of the place. A journey starts with the familiar bell sounding as the gates open. Passengers cross the gangway and the ferry is away, churning the water, the engines rumbling and the boat palpating. A ten-minute ride is long enough to reflect on the scale of recent development on the island, with new towers silhouetted against the Peak rising behind, reminding us that our

achievements are still modest in comparison with those of nature.

On landing, my journey to work continued along Dried Seafood Street where the shutters blinked slowly open in a discordant, unsteady alarm call as the market awoke, the morning silence evolving into a cacophony of sound, reverberated by walls of cement and glass, as traders vied for attention from the growing hordes. Glinting fish, dried scallop, black moss, strange and exotic fares, and then on to stalls heaped with more familiar goods: polished aubergines, a shock of pigs' trotters, pungent bananas and discount toilet roll. It's all there.

Descending through a ramshackle quarter, my walk took a shortcut through an alleyway once used by silk weavers. It connects to a narrow courtyard, with many faces jostling and looking down from towering concrete towers. Hong Kong strikes me as a place of strangers, a transient population engaged in the pursuit of progress, uncertain for whom or for what. A population that burns out after a few years and moves on, leaving an indelible mark in the form of new development.

On Sundays Hong Kong Island is transformed. When business pauses and shops are shut, the high walks and squares take on new meaning. Instead of spaces of movement they become places of settlement. The Filipino population colonises the city with extraordinary guile. Friends gather and set up temporary structures made of strung-together cardboard to mark out their territory. Every square metre of public realm becomes a camp. The space below Foster & Partners' Hongkong & Shanghai Bank (1986) is one of the most intensively used, and it is ironic that the city's poorest find a temporary home under one of East Asia's financial powerhouses. The noise is cacophonous as thousands share stories and ideas, but this is just a temporary interlude. The next day the city's familiar patterns of inhabitation return.

