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The Culture of Compactness: Dimensions of Density in Hong Kong

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Peter Cookson Smith
Dr. Peter Cookson Smith is an architect, planner and urban designer. He has been resident in Hong Kong since 1977 when he founded Urbis Limited, one of the first specialist planning, urban design and landscape consultancies in Southeast Asia. The firm has carried out a large number of projects in Hong Kong, China and the Asia Pacific area, and has won more than 100 local and international awards, including the American Waterfront Centre's Top Honor Award in 2008. He has directed a large number of planning, urban regeneration and waterfront urban design projects in Hong Kong and throughout Asia. For several years he was an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Architecture, the University of Hong Kong, and presently sits on the Advisory Council for the Department of Urban Planning and Design. He is currently the Vice President of the Hong Kong Institute of Planners, and Vice President of the Hong Kong Institute of Urban Design. He is currently a member of Hong Kong's Harbourfront Commission. He is the author of "The Urban Design of Impermanence" on Hong Kong, and the Urban Design of "Concession" on the Chinese Treaty Ports.

...550

"If we did that with the Willis Tower, we could do it with the 550 other buildings in the Loop."

Gail Borthwick of Adrian Smith+Gordon Gill Architecture, on greening and modernization plan of Chicago. From "The Rise of Retrofit," Greensource, November/December 2010.

"Compact cities are, by their nature, relatively sustainable, and Hong Kong is eminently so on many counts. In addition, the emerging intervention of economic forces in the Pearl River Delta continues to superimpose a new collective identity on the region, and is therefore helping to re-fashion both the physical and economic aspects of the city itself."

Western cities have for long nurtured a realm of formal building elements and spatial configurations, including their urban skyscraper enclaves, that until comparatively recent times distinguished Western concepts of urban design from the less permanent and more spontaneous Asian city values. Rem Koolhaas has referred to the "culture of congestion" with regard to New York but more to the point he has astutely described Asian cities as embodying an equally pertinent signature – a tenuous quality of unrest which makes previous configurations expendable, but also each future state provisional. This sums up Hong Kong very well. Wherever we look, this Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China, which occupies only 1,000 square kilometres (386 square miles), is marked by continuing transformation and change. Impermanence underlies its essential urban design language. This is manifested by substantial economic as well as cultural shifts, often representing new and different values superimposed on long established patterns. The representation of urban place is also open to radical change through the make-up and disposition of new spatial types.

During the course of the 20th century, instruments of development policy have been largely based on reconciling the aspirations of a growing population with the often critical shortfall of land and accommodation. In the earliest days of the city building process, government laid down certain ground rules that, while being extended and refined over the years, still influence the form of development – the use of land, sold at auction, as a significant source of government revenue. This, together with a generally laissez-faire economic system has had a significant impact on planning directions. Flexible land-use zoning and successive amendments to the Buildings Ordinance in response to development pressure, particularly in the 1960s, inevitably paved the way for the physical transformation of Hong Kong's urban area into a high-rise city. This has had a clear impact on urban texture – the redevelopment of early 3-story shophouses into six to eight-story blocks was followed in turn by redevelopment of these into multi-story tenements, and then even taller point blocks.

Under Hong Kong's market-driven approach, actual city building objectives are elusive, and it is difficult to stand back at any one time and recognize a situation of "completeness." Due to the new town building programme that commenced in the early 1970s, urban area densities have, for the most part, almost halved, but the morphology of the older urban districts extends well beyond the normal conventions of urban grammar. There is however little firm conceptualization of urban space, which is a cornerstone of western urban design. Thus, new urban configurations contrast yet co-exist with traditional "place" characteristics which relate

more to patterns of activity than physical form. This includes an emphasis on the street for social rituals, ceremonial uses, market trading, open eating areas, and the multi-use of small open spaces (see Figure 1).

The Energizing Ingredients

The expressionism of Hong Kong's older street design for the most part represents an architecture of communication over conceived form. Older street buildings are sporadically and deliberately transformed by their occupiers in a fluid way through personalized building extensions and functional appendages to façades and roofs (see Figure 2), generally on the basis of practicality and immediacy rather than design, with miscellaneous and overlapping functions having few orthodox design credentials. With good urban management, the constant presence of people becomes an essential ingredient for the compact city, energizing activities, minimizing threat, maximising use of public transport, and establishing a ready stream of users for amenities. Inevitably this creates a degree of tension between the complex and interactive working of the city, particularly the need to synchronize certain levels of planning control, with the more indeterminate legacy of informality and spontaneity.

The condensed metro area with its colossal land values and eminently flexible land use zoning, facilitates and perhaps inadvertently encourages a disjointed spatial juxtaposition of independent blocks with little contiguity. Yet these are unified by a kind of parallel universe of informal networks, both physical and electronic. In this situation the uniqueness of "place" is a by-product of the city's essential dynamism where commonalities and interdependencies fashion the very image of the city through an intense range of consumption-oriented services. However, this puts older mixed-use areas on a collision course with economic forces. In some urban districts the value of land is greater than that of the buildings that sit on it. Modern commercial towers require a large floor plate, and redevelopment often means that the fine-grained older quarters are gradually replaced by a more course-grained street matrix.

A Reconstituted Sense of Place

There are now virtually two forms of city character: the first – emblematic of compartmentalization and high-rise efficiency, the second – offering an informal and adaptive response to changing needs and temporary requirements. The first generally embodies a single use complex at a monumental scale, under single ownership or management;

Figure 1. Street vendors

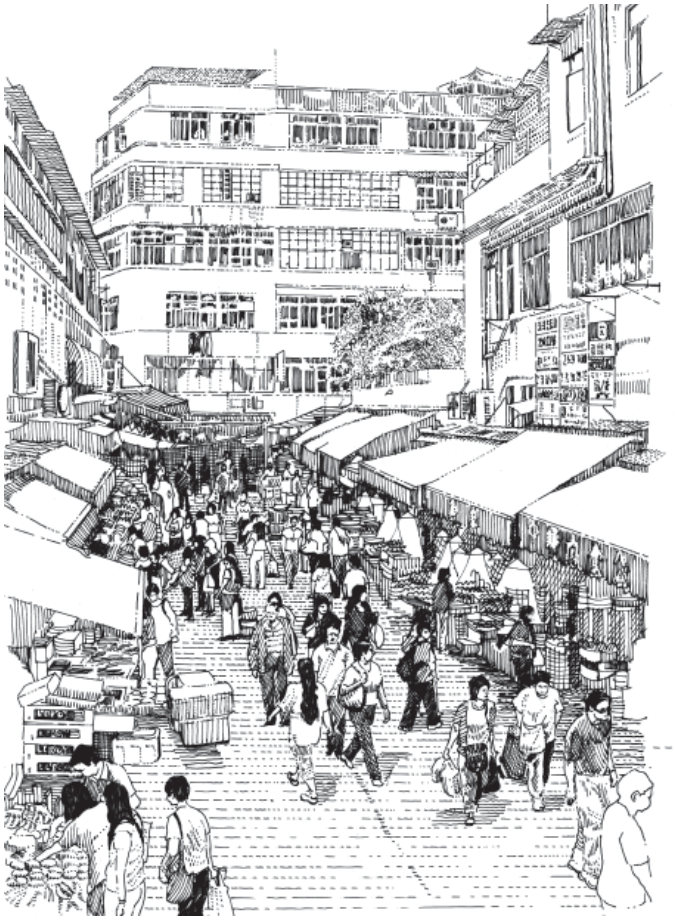

Figure 2. Typical market street in Hong Kong

the second involves areas made up of older street blocks and tenements, and reflects an intangible realm of use and display that defies aesthetic categorization (see Figure 3). Under the second category, complex layering and interpenetration of different elements is accommodated through constant adaptation. Regeneration objectives therefore need to reflect many different kinds of emphasis in relation to older areas. These are not easy to pin down precisely, and relate not just to the economic health of the city with regard to the asset values of housing, commerce and tourism, but to attributes of heritage, memory and culture, all of which need to be reinforced rather than eroded, and which induce a range of secondary benefits associated with the preservation of vibrant communities.

Thus the spirit of place in Hong Kong is elusive – it is rarely manifested in the empirical physicality of the city, but instead reflects the constant insertions and adjustments that invoke different qualities of use. These produce areas of special identity or urban signifiers that interact and change over time in response to prevailing constraints. There is little direct connection between sense of place and a localized aesthetic framework.

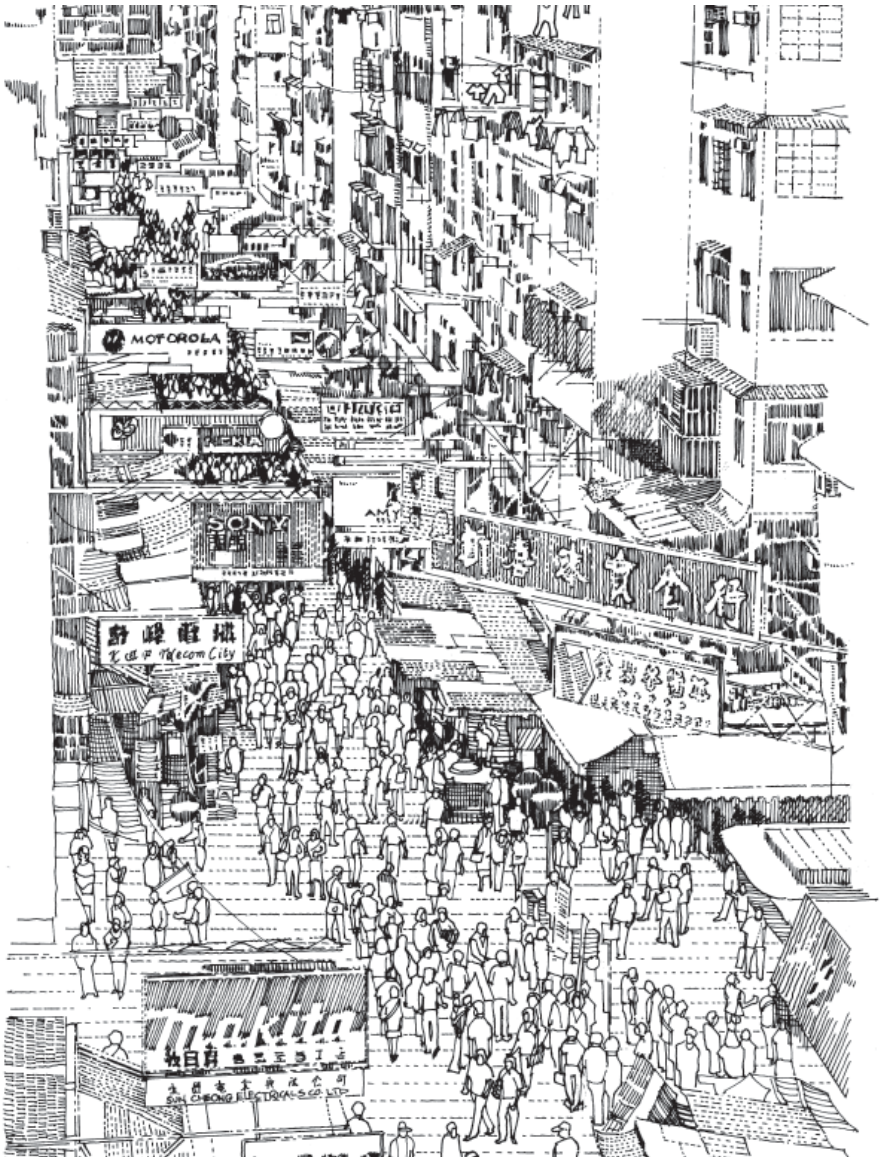

Figure 3. One of Hong Kong's "traditional" places – the busy pedestrianized street

The cultural dimensions of Hong Kong are intrinsically interwoven with a sense of immediacy, physical change and fragmented incident.

The contemporary city has many layers of meaning and temporality accumulated at different stages of growth, stemming from historical imprints, colonial land policies, industrialization, waves of migration from the Mainland, property speculation and former patterns of development. In addition, vulnerable urbanizing regimes made up of temporary components have become periodically insinuated within both the fabric and memory of the city – rooftop dwellers, the sub-division of space within tenements, squatter settlements, and refugee camps, these often being subject to the dislocative hazards of fire, floods and typhoons. In the urban area there is no "tabula rasa" where unconstrained new development can take place, urban design in a typical Hong Kong "quarter" must take as its basis the active history of the area in order to establish a relationship between urban uses, embedded cultural values and new building elements.

Urban Design Dimensions for the Compact City

The process of urban design is not really about pursuing prescriptive physical solutions but more towards integrative place-making that needs to reflect specific dimensions and contextual values. In Hong Kong, as in many other cities, primary control over city development has become progressively diffused so that urban design is now less part of a coherent city building and regeneration process and more the outcome of various affiliated financial, land and regulatory strategies, and therefore difficult to reconcile with other planning and community pre-determinants an important role of urban design must therefore be to safeguard a range of qualities that matter to the community. This is essential if the city is to maintain and reinforce the best of its urban characteristics – diversity, drama, vitality and an eclectic mix of uses – many of which cannot be planned for in the strict sense of the word. These are all factors that make Hong Kong different, if not

unique, and a number of overlapping dimensions can be seen to emerge which reinforce the high density city's giddy reputation for almost constant change.

Morphological Dimensions

The configuration of urban form in the compact city is based on several key factors, the most prominent being the street pattern, adapted and consolidated over 150 years, the lot pattern which continues to change through subdivision or amalgamation: the built structures situated on these lots, and the prevailing land uses. In essence the older fine-grained street grids, obviously influenced by topography and harbor profiles, have successively given way to a courser and less permeable organization of street blocks. Thus there is a tension between the older spatial and movement patterns that have endured up to the present time because of their essential robustness (and which have produced what is still one of the most enduring characteristics of the city – the steep "ladder" streets), and the encroaching pattern of intensification through the development of large-scale, freestanding forms with their new realms of movement and social space which can easily occupy an entire street block.

In turn this raises questions that go beyond typological form, to the essential difference between the single-managed and developer owned mega-complex, and the older tall tenements. While the latter offers the inherent potential to house a changing multitude of activities in response to demand, the former offers occasionally iconic but often only inwardly oriented landmarks with ambiguous public identity.

Perceptual Dimensions

The experience of the compact city might suggest at first glance that the conception of locality is subservient to that of tall buildings. But in essence the combination of sensory values, formal values and symbolic values are intimately connected with the perceptual responsiveness of a place and the working patterns of the community itself, providing that these are physiologically comfortable. In Hong Kong there is a further factor – that of unpredictability and spontaneity. Patterns of use tend to be unified, not by building composition and formal identity, but though a more enigmatic vocabulary of interwoven detail and localized signifiers.

Street environments are able to reconcile intuitive values with patterns of ad-hoc activity evoking the local urban tradition of inventive bricolage that enriches and dramatizes the street frontage (see Figure 4) and establishes a dialectic between internal and external space. Within this process the tall buildings that make up the street wall tend to lose any individually expressive identity and become part of a collective and impersonal backdrop set against the elaborate foreground of the street which is embedded in the complex framework of everyday life.

Social Dimensions

The physical organization of urban space and its social functioning are of course closely intertwined. However in Hong Kong it is not so much environmental design that

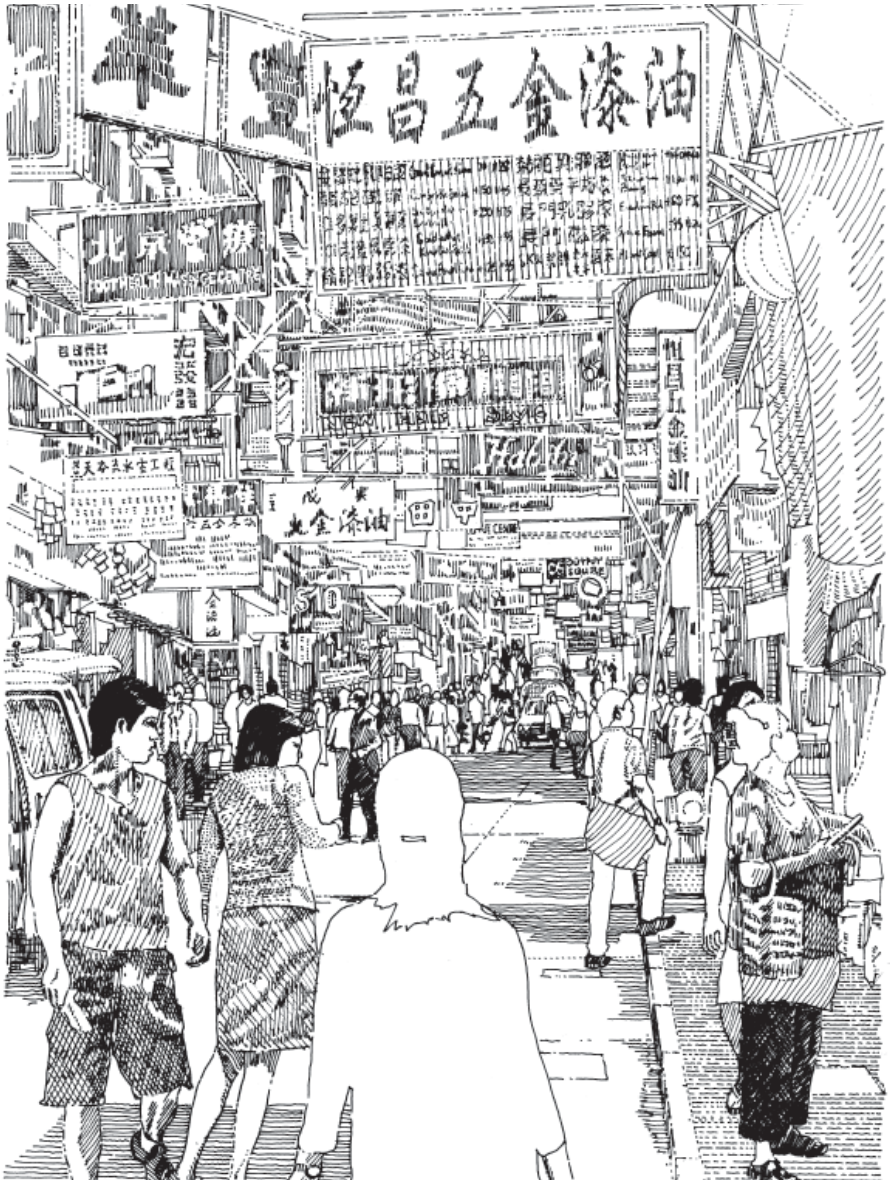

Figure 4. The multi-faceted Hong Kong's street frontage

influences patterns of social or behavioral activity, but the public realm that develops spontaneously around flexible street fabric within which the local community establishes its own sets of uses, events and realms of transaction, shaped and animated by a wide range of users, and where activities feed off each other (see Figure 5).

The vertical stratification of commercial and community uses in the older parts of the city with their associated activity and movement channels, underlines an essential difference between the formal framework of western public spaces and the more diffused and informal realm where the relationship between "public" and "private" is less tangible, and the routes between them work just as effectively in three dimensions as in two. The result is an urban design of edges and interfaces unfazed by physical heritage, rather than strict spatial demarcations and divisions.

Visual Dimensions

Visual appreciation of urban environment is strongly related in the West with aesthetic considerations, closely associated with cognitive understanding and consistent architectural typologies. In the context of Hong Kong's abstract urban forms and tight urban massing, built fabric cannot necessarily be "read" in an orthodox sense but through "patterns of correspondence" which presuppose the simultaneous existence of visual complexity and unifying elements where sameness is alleviated by a multitude of irregularities, signage and other communication devices which sustain both interest and engagement with the stacked and rhythmic patterns of the city. In this way streets establish a sense of expressive incident and kinetic unity rather than architecturally contrived space. Voids in the high-density matrix become positively charged by temporary uses and somehow establish both a visual and functional sense of "fit."

Functional Dimensions

In the compact city, spaces and circulation corridors reflect a complex assembly of

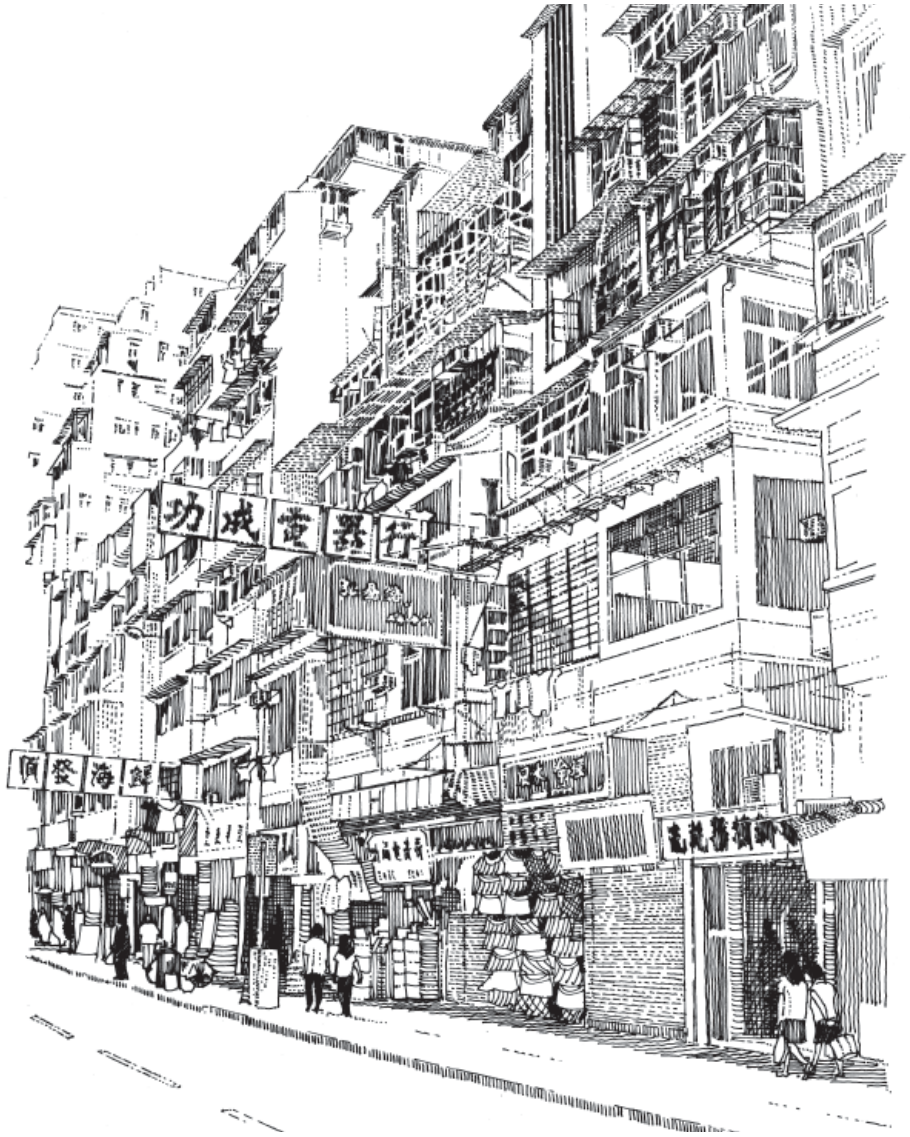

Figure 5. The "older" Hong Kong

natural, informal and constructed components that facilitate various levels of social, cultural and educational engagement between people and places. As much of Hong Kong city building has been based on contingency and constantly changing physical delineation, the very neutrality of street walls and the lack of finite built configurations serves to fashion a situation where the definition of circulation and activity areas have a greater impact on the setting than the architectural fabric.

In Hong Kong the busiest pedestrian connections are not derived from historic streets and axial movement flows, but from a sequence of interventions in the urban framework involving a complicated hierarchy of movement channels, the purposeful commercial incorporation of pedestrian linkage between intense activity nodes, and the reconciliation between public and private interests in bringing this about (see Figure 6). These "dedicated connectors" extend their paths through lobbies, malls and atria of commercial complexes, forming part of intricate and multi-level retail patterns. Public space therefore interfaces with a more ambiguous space that is to a large extent

aimed at stimulating consumption through a strategically articulated system of commodity-oriented channels and concourses. These become the new cultural constructs providing condensed "foci" of urban ritual and encounter. People interface both directly and indirectly with product, and the corporate typology of space often provides a more permeable alternative to the regularity and discomfort of the street. At the same time, the internal mall, atria or galleria inevitably recast the way in which the city is experienced, connecting transit nodes with residential, hotel or commercial towers that effectively exclude visual or spatial interface with the wider city realm.

Temporal Dimensions

In Hong Kong the transition of uses throughout the day means not merely changes in use, but different sets of users who inhabit urban space at different times for different purposes, although this is by no means mutually exclusive. In the compact city this increases the attraction of people to places as locations are shared on a time basis rather than being used intensively but intermittently by one particular interest group. Temporal change is therefore a function of the availability of space in relation to specific interest groups that have easy access to it.

The onset of darkness brings about an effective transformation where the user is not merely a recipient but a participant in a series of unfolding events. Streets that might have a mundane daytime character take on a new sub-realism through an assemblage of evocative associations that animate space with information overload. This convolutes the normal experience of urban space, but also introduces interesting aspects of urban time management – for example the famous escalator sections that snake through the local ladder streets, and across intervening road corridors, carry workers downwards to the CBD in the morning and are directed upwards in the evening, dispersing users through adjoining streets at various levels, stimulating the growth and change of uses in neighboring areas, and promoting constantly evolving patterns of activity along its path.

End Note

Compact cities are, by their nature, relatively sustainable, and Hong Kong is eminently so on many counts. In addition, the emerging intervention of economic forces in the Pearl River Delta continues to superimpose a new collective identity on the region, and is therefore helping to re-fashion both the physical and economic aspect of the city itself. In this environment of urban re-invention, complexity and pluralism we need to recognize the need for a balanced co-existence between flexible and more static components so that the disparate parts can be mutually reinforcing. The overlapping dimensions of urban design in Hong Kong's urban habitat underpin its workability and value. ■

Illustrations from *"The Urban Design of Impermanence"* by Peter Cookson Smith, MCCM Publications, 2007

...Seoul

> "As Dubai has Burj Khalifa and New York has the Empire State Building, we determined that we needed a symbolic building."
>
> *Lee Won-woo, President and CEO of Lotte Corporation, announcing the start of Lotte Tower's construction. From "Lotte Tower Reaches for Sky," Korea JoongAng Daily, November 25, 2010.*

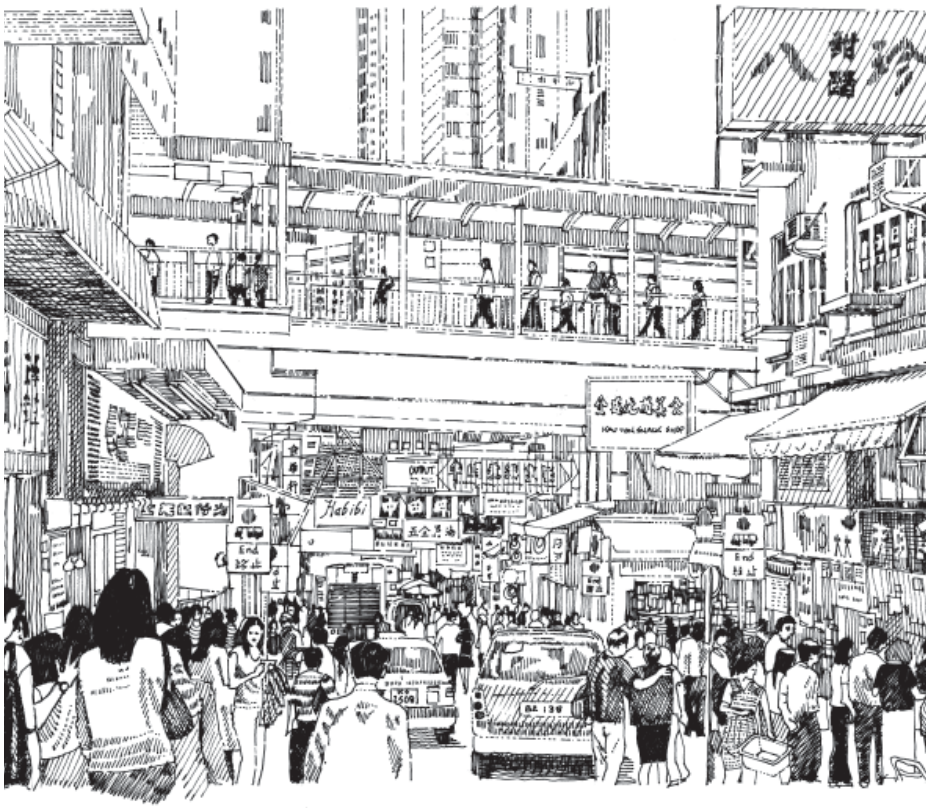

Figure 6. "Pedestrian connector"