

VIEWPOINT

Photographing Public Spaces in Hong Kong

Kevin Mak

@kingymak



Courtyard of a public housing tower in Hong Kong. Picture by Kevin Mak.

Photographing urban space has always been my interest, even before I entered architectural school and began my career as an architect. When I was still at school, I already enjoyed observing, through my camera, on how the complex yet limited public spaces in Hong Kong accommodated the diverse and spontaneous street life. Studying &

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practising in architecture further shaped my interest in exploring Hong Kong's urban topics beyond the visuals. My approach in urban photography promotes spatial aesthetics that embrace diverse cultures in public space, and controversially suggests how we introspect our way & attitude living in contemporary cities.

An interview with Zolima Citymag in 2018¹ summarized very much on how I see the importance of public space in Hong Kong: *'it's not the buildings that make a city special, it's the space in between them.'* Buildings could look the same over time, but the activities in the space in between never repeat.



Solitary on a slope. Picture by Kevin Mak.

¹ Available at: <https://zolimacitymag.com/hong-kong-on-instagram-kingymaks-urban-space/>

We could investigate through the urban context of Hong Kong to understand how unique Hong Kong streets act as the key public space in Hong Kong rather than 'relying' on parks or playgrounds. In the past 50-60 years, the city has been rapidly developing into an extremely high-density city with nature usually detached from built areas- mainly due to the city's hilly topography, and limited flat lands. Amount of urban parks or playgrounds never fulfil the Planning Standard².

Even when available, they could sometimes be too slow to catch up with the population growth & redevelopments. These small open spaces serve up to thousands of people per day, management rules were implemented for easier management and they do not allow certain activities to happen.



Door to the Nature behind the gate . Picture by Kevin Mak.

² The Hong Kong Planning Standards and Guidelines (HKPSG) suggest that the Planning Department plans districts so that each person has 2m² of recreational open space. But such standard is usually already too high than reality - https://www.pland.gov.hk/pland_en/tech_doc/hkpsg/full/pdf/ch4.pdf

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It is true that hiking trails or countryside parks are never far from the city, but they are also not as close to an extent that could be accessed on a daily basis. We all need public space to take a deep breathe, to smoke, to take a walk with our dogs, or just to embrace the warmth from the sun to clear one's mind - such space might be commonly available in some other cities that are less dense, yet they are not easily found in most districts in Hong Kong. In Hong Kong, streets took over such responsibility for even more spontaneous social interactions.



Street stalls in Central. Picture by Kevin Mak.

Despite the discussion on whether the overwhelming activities on the streets are good or bad for urban life, such condition is a heaven for urban photography. For me, the attractiveness of these Hong Kong public spaces could be summarized below:

I. Rich & diverse elements accumulated over time

In many older parts of Hong Kong, the streets are full of cluttered shop signs, informal stalls, and vernacularly modified building facades with air-conditioners and clothes hanging racks. These simply offer rich textures as an urban backdrop - a public stage. The major differences of such stage from a newly built, green open space are the organic nature of the space and its history.



Open street wet market along tramways in North Point. Picture by Kevin Mak.

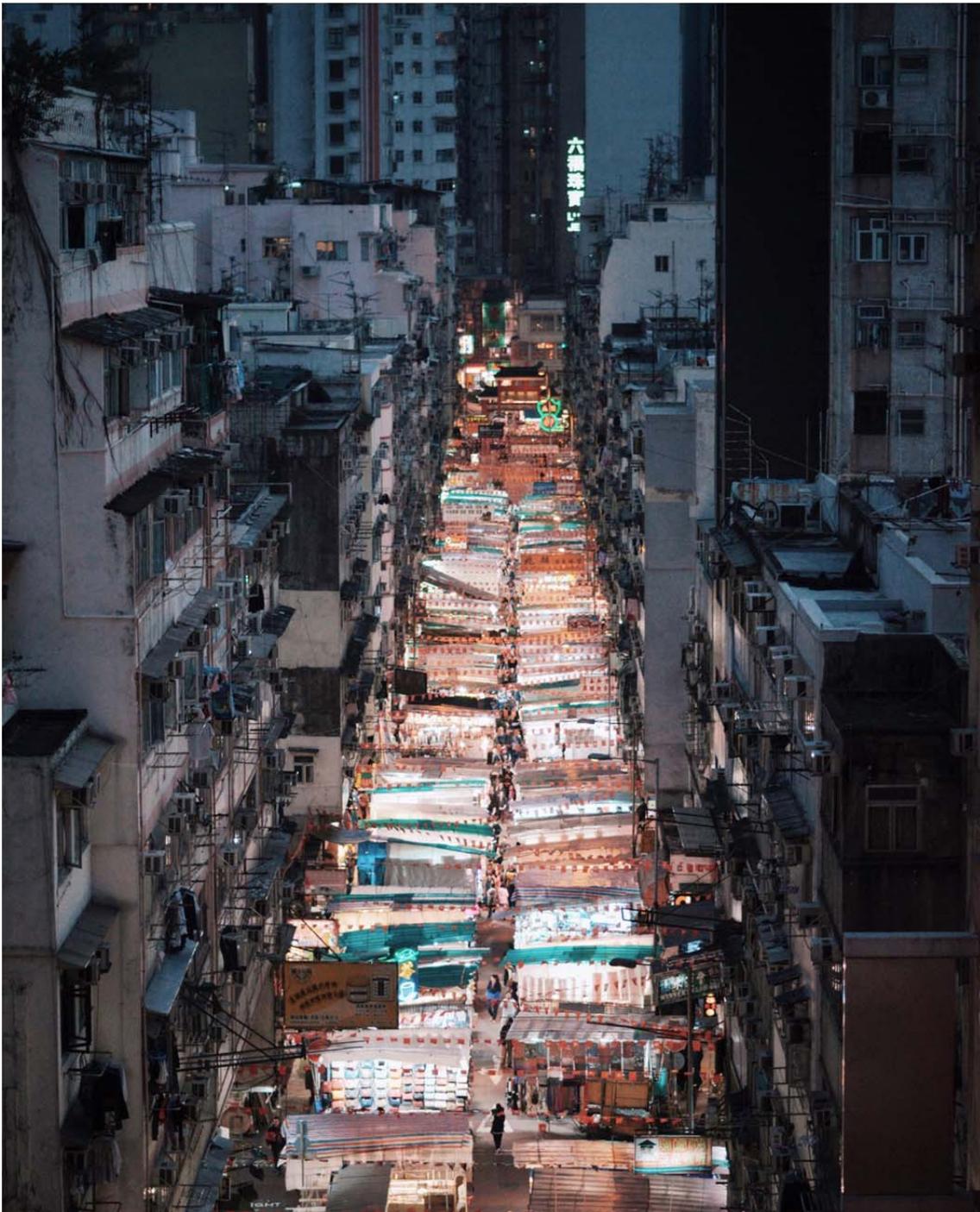
A planned open space is an ideology to create something artificial & a surreal provision of an emptier space within a dense city; an organic stage is however less planned and highly related to the original urban fabric & community. Shops, the neighbourhood, and their

demands of activities shaped such public space throughout history. Best examples are the street markets in Hong Kong.



Jordan street market. Picture by Kevin Mak.

A lot of them began as street stalls that occupied roads. They are gradually regulated with licenses & certain rules. These different clusters of markets were however not planned. They came together in history. Such public space welcomes people from different backgrounds - from the colonial generation to new Chinese immigrants, from international expats to local working class. Sometimes they contradict with each other, but the complex co-existence attracts my eyes. I love capturing the structures behind these - they look informal yet stable, random but with patterns.



Temple Street Market in Yau Ma Tei. Picture by Kevin Mak.

Photographing a scene like this could be similar to the process of creating an art collage. Elements come into and leave the frame continuously. They are never artificial as they represented a certain balanced reality that is reflecting the necessity in life. It could be overwhelming for someone not looking for urban life - but someone like myself would see it as a paradise full of resources as if we are animals in a tropical rainforest that is full of possibilities.



Overcrowded pedestrian way in Central. Picture by Kevin Mak.

2. Unique way that some public spaces are being used, based on the urban constraints
Street photography has a lot to do with capturing an extraordinary moment out of the ordinary. To apply that into the observation of public space, one would begin to notice how some spaces are being used differently than their original intents.



Solitary at waterfront in Noint Point. Picture by Kevin Mak.



Temp bamboo theatre built under bypass highway for a Chinese festival at Hill Road. Picture by Kevin Mak.

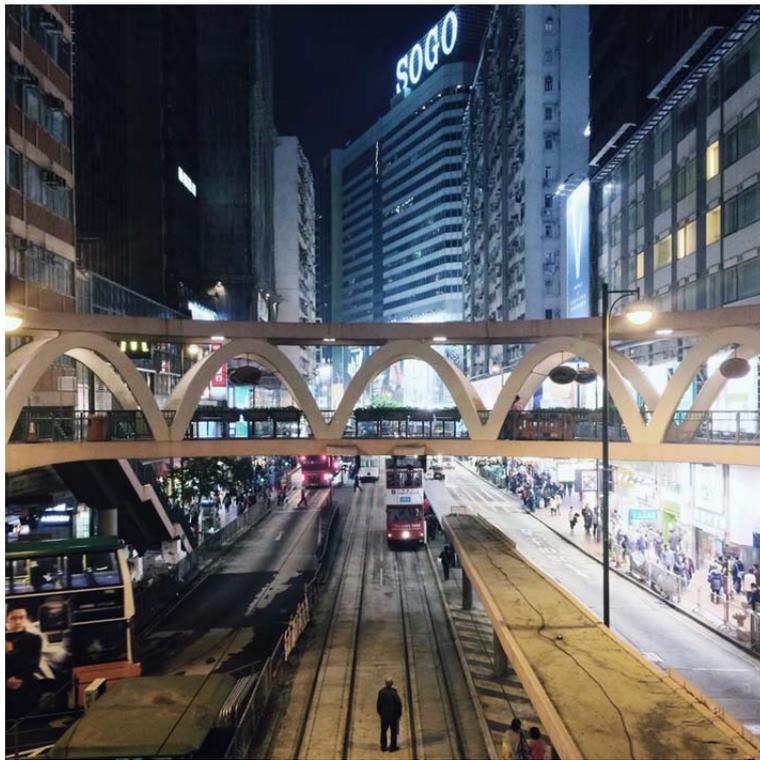
Hong Kong is famous for the elevated walkway system that avoided vehicle traffic, until the domestic workers taking it to the next level. Most of these 390,000 workers (~5% of the population!), mainly from Philippine & Indonesia, take their day-off on Sunday and would often gather to 'picnic' on the footbridges for the whole day as it's well ventilated under the subtropical humid weather. They could sometimes block more than half of the width of these footbridges, but it's widely accepted as these are the only leftover public space in Hong Kong. This shows a lot on the shortage of public spaces in Hong Kong, and how creative people would use them. As an example, when it comes to city-wide festivals such as the Chinese Ghost Festival, temporary bamboo theatres would be built in many historical districts. Among them, the one at Hill Road under a flyover & on a steep slope is an extreme and mission impossible. The slope does however form a perfect theatre setting that offer very good sightline for the audience. Photographing scenes like this explains a lot of a city's culture, and are great case studies for architects and planners.

3. Spontaneously cinematic & emotional scenes

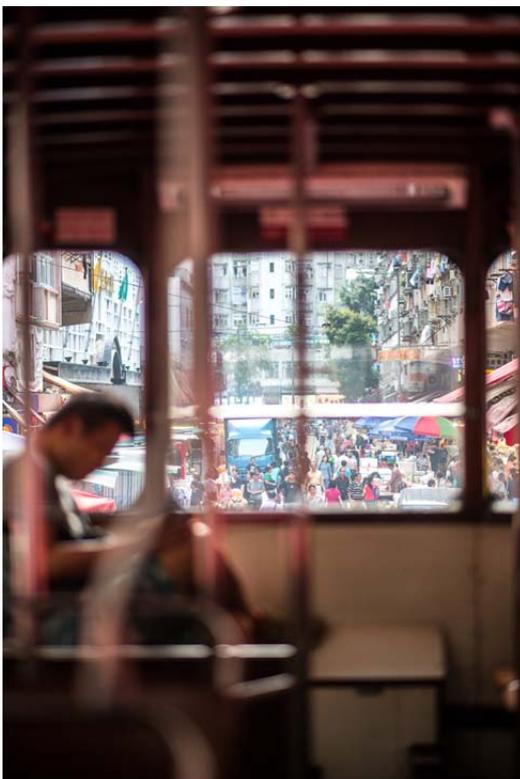
Apart from capturing the extraordinary within urban design and planned spatial functionality, public spaces have their charm because of the human activities, which they accommodate. They form journeys beyond regular life pattern, between work and private life. They are background for stories that trigger emotions and one's relationship to his/her life in a city. The vibrant and dense public space of Hong Kong could be a downside for many people, because of the noise, crowd, poor natural light and ventilation, hygiene conditions, etc. There are however also countless advantages, e.g. close proximity, convenient, economically efficient. They allow more interactions than being in a park and they are also great platforms to do people-watching. Noises could be a meditation. I like to focus on a solitary character: a man stopping in the middle of a busy street, a man enjoy some personal time on a tram with busy market in the background, a worker making a conversation with a cat on his way to work.

Each of these characters tells a story that can only happen within a particular public space at a particular moment. Altogether we could grab a glance from what are really important to people's life from these emotional scenes, and be inspired to appreciate the existing but unnoticeable beauty through new perspectives.

The photography of public space began as observations, but has extended to represent some phenomena that could be hard to explain through statistics or other means of research. For policy makers, architects and planners, we might even find these moments difficult to be recreated. They keep questioning myself on whether we should restructure how we design on top of an existing community, on how much we should research, and on how much new intervention are reasonable - in order to keep a public space's authenticity that is closely related to a city's history, culture, and communities. Photography is widely available nowadays, and it could be the moment that we make use of the power of such visual storytelling perspective in design.



A second of solitary. Picture by Kevin Mak.



*(On the left) Solitary on a tram surrounded by noise. Picture by Kevin Mak.
(On the right) Store-cat of a dry food store. Picture by Kevin Mak.*



Open street wet market + tramways in North Point. Picture by Kevin Mak.



Reading in a planned park with an unplanned plant. Picture by Kevin Mak.

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Slow tram and fast people. Picture by Kevin Mak.