

Redefining the Hong Kong typology

The concept of the global city is taken to extremes in Hong Kong. In many ways the city epitomizes the definition of what one might consider a truly global city in the contemporary context. Despite the highly global nature of Hong Kong, there remains a strong sense of the local that provides contrast and friction to some of these globalizing forces.

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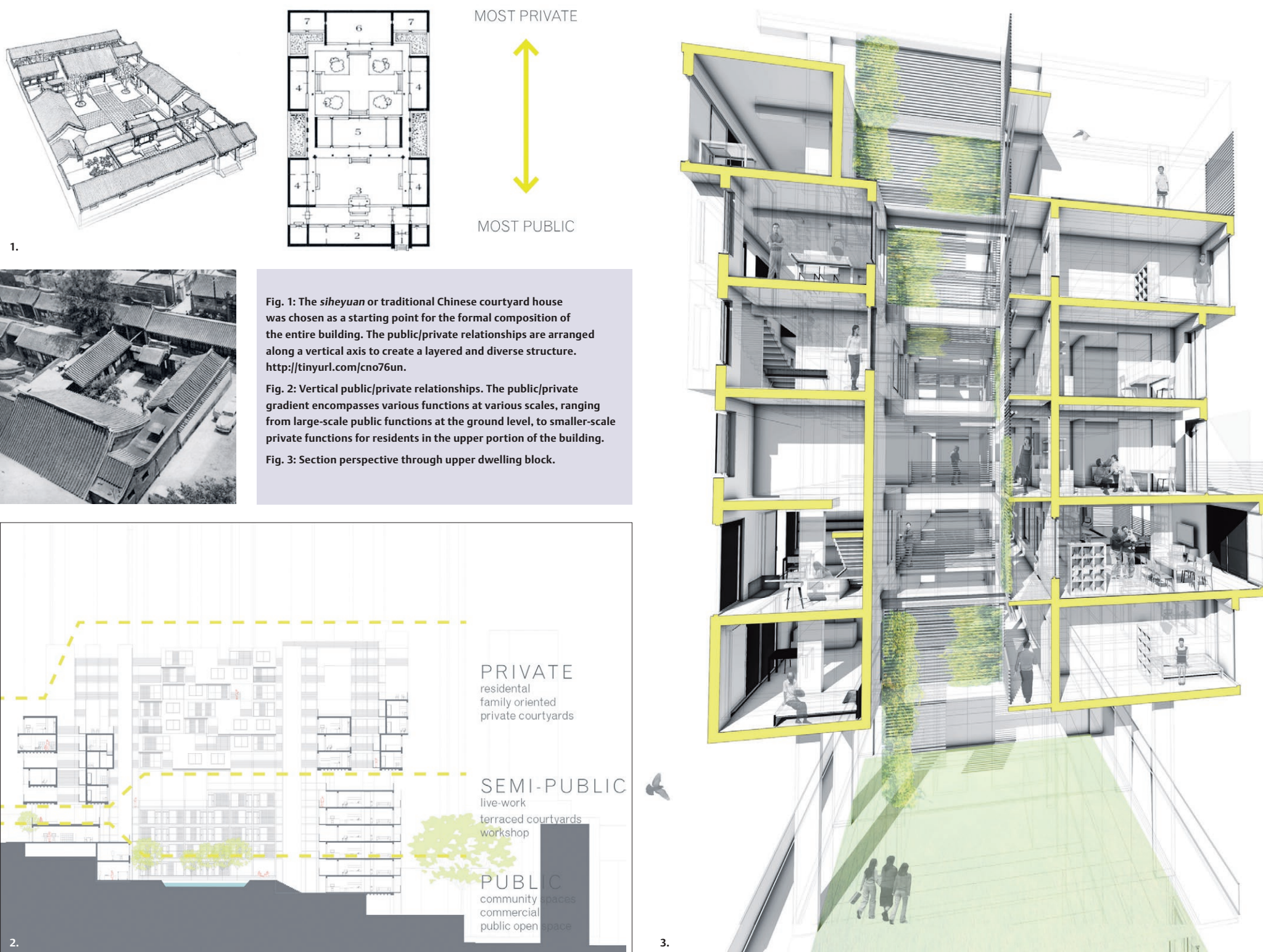


Fig. 1: The *siheyuan* or traditional Chinese courtyard house was chosen as a starting point for the formal composition of the entire building. The public/private relationships are arranged along a vertical axis to create a layered and diverse structure. <http://tinyurl.com/cno76un>.

Fig. 2: Vertical public/private relationships. The public/private gradient encompasses various functions at various scales, ranging from large-scale public functions at the ground level, to smaller-scale private functions for residents in the upper portion of the building.

Fig. 3: Section perspective through upper dwelling block.

GIVEN THE RAPID political and economic changes that have taken place in Hong Kong since the 1960s, the built environment has become a prime example of the conditions under which the city operates. In his book, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*, Ackbar Abbas describes one of these conditions as a "culture of disappearance", which he asserts is a direct consequence of speed related to globalization.¹ Disappearance and speed can also be applied literally with respect to changes and development on the urban scale, as in many cases the sense of permanence in Hong Kong is subverted due to rapid redevelopment and alterations of the city landscape.

Today, Hong Kong's urban environment can be read as a palimpsest of the changes and influences it has been subject to through colonialism, capitalism, neoliberalism and the technological boom of the late twentieth century. Although many of the major transactions and exchanges appear to occur on a global scale, these networks and flows also have physical implications on the built environment of the city. Therefore, examining how these global forces have in turn shaped the local environment of Hong Kong was a key component to the research undertaken.

The increase in luxury accommodations in the centre of Hong Kong, combined with the redevelopment of older neighbourhoods, and increasing cost of living, has led to a growing asymmetry of development within the city. As an example, in the last thirty years, agencies such as the Land Development

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Corporation (now known as the Urban Renewal Authority) have worked with developers to manipulate the urban environment. After its introduction in 1988, the LDC had slated almost all of the older districts of Hong Kong Island for renewal, save the Central Business District.² Many of the current renewal projects have moved across Victoria Harbour and are now concentrated on the Kowloon Peninsula, such as the Kwun Tong redevelopment, which will see the displacement of 4829 individuals. Government land policy encourages the proliferation of high-end residential developments, while a growing disparity of wealth is forcing poorer residents out of the city and into the poorly connected peripheral New Towns. In this global space of flows, architecture is an object as much as it is conduit for both global and local networks.

Located around the border of Sheung Wan and Central, the study area chosen for the site is one with a considerable number of older buildings from the mid-twentieth century, more specifically, four-to-eight storey *tong lau* shophouses. High land prices in Hong Kong have sandwiched the study area between two distinct development zones, the Central Business District to the north and a high-end, high-rent residential area to the south, moving upwards towards the Peak. As a result, this older neighbourhood fabric has been increasingly under threat from redevelopment and many *tong lau* are being demolished in favour of 40-storey high-rise towers. Alternately, smaller scale gentrification projects are also becoming more common in the area. Although often well intentioned, these projects also increase the possibility of raising prices, forcing

existing residents out of their own neighbourhood. The site for this design is the former Police Married Quarters at 35 Aberdeen Street, one of the oldest parts of the city. The building has been vacant since 2000 and has been used for various exhibitions since then. The most recent redevelopment scheme for the block had it transformed into an arts and culture hub, but it fails to address the pressing need for affordable housing.

There are several open spaces in the area, ranging from recreational parks to small sitting-out areas. However, there is still a shortage of open public space given the density of the area. Programmatically the area is quite varied, but clustered into a few distinct groups. SOHO and the area around the Mid-Levels Escalator is a large entertainment hub with many bars, restaurants, and boutiques. Further west there are more community-oriented functions such as churches and schools, while Hollywood Road is a hotspot for galleries and antique stores. At the westernmost part of the study area, Tai Ping Shan Street is home to many small-scale design firms, boutiques, and creative outlets. During my site visit I identified several user groups who frequented the area, namely the young creative class, business people, tourists, children, and elderly residents (especially women).

Using this experience of the site (and the research I undertook prior to visiting Hong Kong), I developed a few key points which drove the research and design process:

- What is the new Hong Kong typology and how can it fit the needs of present and future Hong Kong?



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Fig. 4: Perspective of entrance courtyard off Staunton Street.



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Fig. 5: Entrance with market terrace.

Fig. 6: Communal space of the vertical courtyard network.

Fig. 7: Family duplex unit. Given that it is not uncommon in Chinese culture for parents and children to live together for longer periods than in the West, this unit is designed as a duplex, with a 41m² unit for an elderly couple, combined with a 140m² unit for a family of up to four. The configuration also provides a 22m² outdoor terrace which acts as an extension of the indoor living spaces.



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- Existing housing typologies in Hong Kong do not address the complexities of the urban condition in the city and severities with the city's vibrant street life.
- Increasing development of old building stock into luxury high-rises will displace existing residents and make the neighbourhood unaffordable.
- There is a large number of elderly, young, and disabled residents – combined with the aforementioned issues this points to an acute need for affordable housing in the city centre.
- What is the balance between gentrification and redevelopment?
- The site is located between areas of activity; how can it better bridge these areas?
- Lack of community amenities for all ages and/or groups (green space, community centres).
- Given Hong Kong's climate and environmental concerns, sustainability should play a large role in the project (e.g., dealing with microclimates, mediating pollution, sustainable energy/materials).

In terms of an urban strategy, the site was envisioned as a node within a larger network of creative and green spaces that would act to strengthen the overall coherence of the area and give it stronger identity. When determining the program for the design project, it was important to keep in mind the user groups that I had observed while in Hong Kong. Affordable housing would be the main component of the program and would cater to families, the elderly, the young creative class,

and students. Workshop space and studios would also serve the above-mentioned groups, while small-scale commercial enterprises would be an opportunity to get business people involved in the development. Much needed open space would be an amenity for all groups, as well as a flexible exhibition and community space for the arts.

One of the first steps in moving forward with the design work was to investigate some traditional Chinese dwelling typologies. The two most interesting were the *siheyuan* and the *tu lou*. The *siheyuan*, or courtyard house, has a public to private gradation that I thought could be successfully manipulated to suit a new urban context in Hong Kong. The courtyard house was taken as a starting point for further formal exploration and the public/private relationships were arranged along a vertical axis, instead of horizontally. By vertically separating the upper and lower massing, a space for semi-public vertical courtyards is created.

A series of 11 unit types were designed to fit with the user groups defined at the outset of the design process. Arranged in various configurations throughout the building, these units form the main component of the design. The units are compact but flexible enough to allow changes in family size/user needs. One of the more important units is the family duplex unit. Given that it is not uncommon in Chinese culture for parents and children to live together for longer periods of time than in Western culture, this unit is designed as a duplex, with a 41m² unit for an elderly couple, combined with a 140m² unit for a family of up to four. The configuration also provides

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a 22m² outdoor terrace, which acts as an extension of the indoor living spaces. Additionally, the rental scheme for the apartment complex could facilitate the needs of families by giving priority to those already living in the dwelling to rent or buy units to suit changing configurations of their family structure over time.

Along with designing the courtyard spaces throughout the building, roofscapes became an important part of the design as well. Rooftops can be used as terrace spaces for the residents, gardens for growing food and other plants, as well as infrastructure for water collection. The modular design and simple unit layouts makes the project affordable, while the series of vertical courtyards and open circulation spaces encourages passive cooling and reduces the required energy loads for the building. This reconceptualization of the courtyard house provides a new alternative to the isolated high-rise typologies prevalent in Hong Kong, and infuses public space, green space and flexible dwelling typologies into the design.

Elsa Snyder completed her Masters in Architecture at the Hong Kong studio in July of 2012, graduating with an honourable mention. She is currently working as an architect in the Netherlands (elsa.snyder@gmail.com; www.elsasnyder.com).

Notes

- 1 Ackbar Abbas. 1997. *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p.9.
- 2 Christopher De Wolf. 2010. 'Rethinking Urban Renewal in Hong Kong', *Urban Photo*, <http://tinyurl.com/bjtrcva>.