

Sublime and heterotopic landscapes

The current state of the Asian urban environment is characterized by a high level of capitalist policies. Due to land-scarcity and economic benefit, a mass migration surge from the countryside to the coast is taking place in most Asian countries. To handle the influx of these people, many cities resort to a 'maximum profit per footprint' policy. Here the smallest possible piece of land is extruded as high as possible into the air, to be divided into tiny fragments, often not exceeding 20m². The resulting urban situation is that of walking through a canyon-like abyss, shaped by the concrete forest of anonymous towers.

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The Sublime is an overwhelming experience, both beautiful and terrifying; a Heterotopia is the place of the Other, but serves as a reflection of the 'everyday' world.

Fig. 1: Impression of the building integrating into the skyline of Hong Kong. Its horizontality provides a background and a contrast to the rest of the city.

Fig. 2: Impression of the cutting, jumping and connecting of the building with the city fabric. View taken from the interior of the square.

Fig. 3: Longitudinal section. Different functions require different-sized boxes; these are placed in-between the column structure, keeping the building stable. The 'multiple artificial perspectives' of the drawing enhances the 'sublime' aspect of 'being lost'.

MORE OFTEN THAN NOT, these towers have no discernible architectural features and/or quality. They are placed haphazardly onto the topography, often without regard for the neighbourhood or the surroundings. The result is that developments in Asian cities tend to resemble one another. The city becomes a highly disconnected/disjointed space between the public domain and the private sphere. This project tries first of all to define these aspects in the city of Hong Kong; secondly, it maximizes them in order to (paradoxically) balance them out.

The program of the project is that of a university. In order to get a grip on these characteristics they had to be defined in an abstract sense. This became 1) the Sublime, as expounded by Immanuel Kant in response to Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* and 2) the Heterotopia, a concept developed by French poststructuralist philosopher Michel Foucault in an article entitled 'Des Espace Autres' (published in France in *Architecture/Mouvement/Continuité* in 1984, but originally introduced by him during a lecture he gave in 1967).

The Sublime can best be described as an overwhelming experience, which is both beautiful and terrifying at the same time. A well-known example would be Caspar David Friedrich's painting *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818). Here we see a well-dressed gentleman, overlooking a mist-filled mountain valley; how he got there we don't know. He is standing on the peak of a rough mountain terrain, absorbing the beauty (or maybe getting ready to jump).

A Heterotopia is the place of the Other, a secluded place that can exist by itself and also serve as a reflection of the 'everyday' world; for example, a library, a cemetery, a university, or a prison. These concepts define the experience when first visiting the megalopolis of Hong Kong. The sheer bigness of it all has a kind of beauty, while also the terrifying sense of being utterly insignificant. On the other hand, most recently developed Asian cities have this aspect, this bigness, thus leaving open the question of 'background'. If it is so big, what are we meant to read it against?

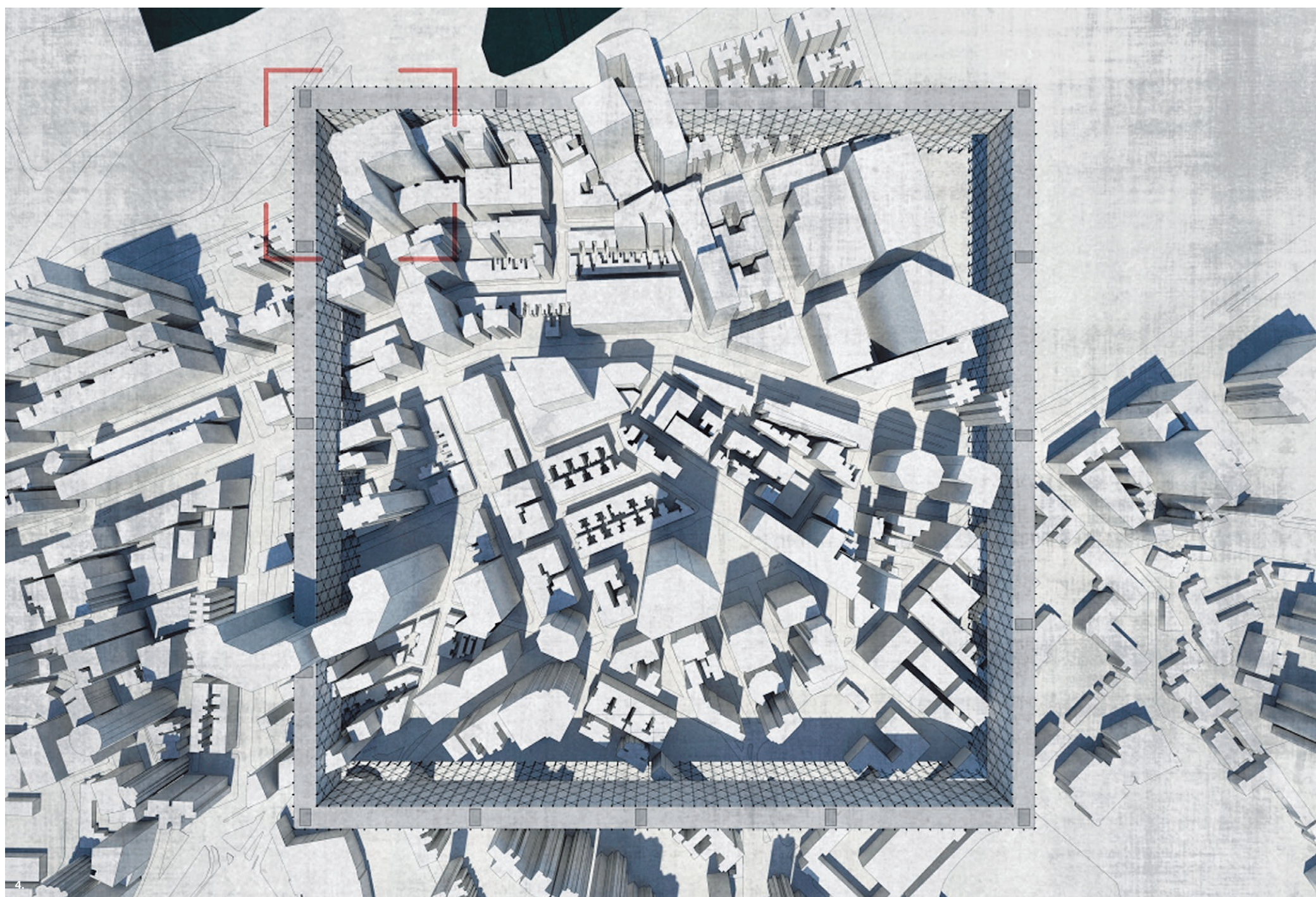
To read the city against a neutral background was the initial concept of this design project, much like the space of a monastery which is conceived as defining the interior space



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of the courtyard against the 'wild' nature outside the monastery walls. The building had to become a defining space in the city; giving condition to the inside *and* the outside. (Even though, in a strict sense, there is no such thing). By making the building a closed square, the condition arises out of itself. Taken from a map of the city, coordinate lines are brought into reality. These lines, which help one orientate and navigate the spaces on the map, form the first plan for the square. 560 metres square, with a depth of 18 metres and rising 100 metres into the air, the university is superimposed onto the existing fabric of the city. The structure is build up in such a way that it, despite its abstract shape, leaves all the buildings intact. Where needed, it either touches or jumps over existing buildings thus forming a second landscape in the city.

One can enter the university through a multitude of entry points. Common functions, which are shared by different faculties and the city, are located at the square's four corners. These include, for example, the restaurant, sporting facilities, large auditoria, etc. These main entry points are supplemented by three additional entry points located between them. The connection with the city can happen through a seamless ascension out of the urban fabric. Making use of the existing elevated pedestrian walkways, or cut-away corners, one can move seamlessly up to the first couple of floors. Occasionally, when the structure encounters a building that is too high for it to jump over, it touches the building and integrates with it, sharing connections to the public transport networks or offices. These entrance points are also the clusters through which the structure is organized in a vertical sense. Elevators will carry visitors up to the desired floor where, again, the most commonly used functions, like auditoria or library spaces, are located. Moving from here in a horizontal fashion, the visitor encounters quieter, secretive spaces that can be used for self-study or for private meetings.

Moving horizontal, however, will require some effort. Spaces are laid out in a non-straightforward way. On top of this, the route the visitor has to take often leads through enclosed spaces where people are working or studying. Thus, the experience is a maze-like 'going in and out' of seemingly closed boxes, floating disjointedly above

and below one another. Every space, therefore, exists as an individual entity and simultaneously confronts the surroundings of the block with its presence. Contrasts between these two realities are enhanced by allowing the outside spaces to be exposed to the forces of nature, while the inside spaces are contained, acclimatized, and protected. Lighting conditions will also reflect this relationship, with maximum contrast between the naturally lit, vertical street conditions and the inside spaces, which are either completely dark (i.e., when unused) or brightly lit by artificial lighting. The visitors can lose themselves here, feeling a desperate need for grounding, combined with a twinge of fear: the fear of being lost. This aspect is reflected in the artificially constructed multiple perspectives used in the section drawing of part of the square (fig. 2). Every space has its own vanishing point, thus exists within itself, while all the while relating to the rest of the drawing. Combine this with the shifts in bridges, sudden drops and chasms, and the occasional forceful gust of wind and the new Sublime landscape is created as a city within the city.

Recognizing the fact that existing buildings will abut this new structure, especially the high-rise towers, will provide a new dimension to the city. Inside the university, the different faculties are given shape according to different areas in the city. The morphology is abstracted and reiterated in the university as a synecdoche of the city itself. While in the centre of the square the image will be one of a bright glittering ocean-like canvas behind which sit the buildings that are directly visible. This is due to the system of freely penetrable aluminium panelling that is used. These can move in the wind and play out a game of waves, giving a surreal spectacle of illusionary endlessness. The interior structure will only be vaguely readable, thus contributing to, firstly, the background, and secondly to the Sublime concept. From outside the square, a darker presence is discernible as a black bar crossing between the skyscrapers and the sky. It will only be possible to identify the interior programme of the building by judging the amount of 'roughness' created by the folding panels. With these two clearly distinguishable sides, an explicit contrast between the interior and exterior is created. Enforcing the concept of a Heterotopia, freely penetrable but providing a mirror to itself.

Fig. 4: Floor plan showing the complete square of the building. Vertical cores are placed at regular intervals and the structure stops where it abuts 'bigger' buildings (for example, the Times Square shopping and office complex at the lower right-hand corner).

Fig. 5: This impression shows the contrasting spaces of the interior and the existing city. Light can filter through the moveable panelling on the interior façade of the square, in contrast to the darker, outer façade.

Although the project has a high level of abstraction, the premise is nonetheless brought to a credible level. The structure is modular, as is its contents and programme, thus allowing for a growing and shrinking of the university as required. A system of construction has been designed in order to deal with the narrow spaces of Hong Kong's streetscape. Items of a more concrete nature, such as the financing of the project, or of getting relevant planning permissions, etc., from all land and building owners have not been fully resolved.

The current situation in China is that migrants want the next generation to do better than they have; sending them to a good university is one very practical option for betterment, and it creates a unique opportunity for Hong Kong, which will lose its Special Administrative Region status within China in 2047. Remodelling itself into a 'knowledge city' will give it enough distinction in the Pearl River Delta region. This square of university program will function as an attractor and intensifier of city program, leaving a possible future scenario where banks and offices inside the square are taken over by university program and student dormitories.

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