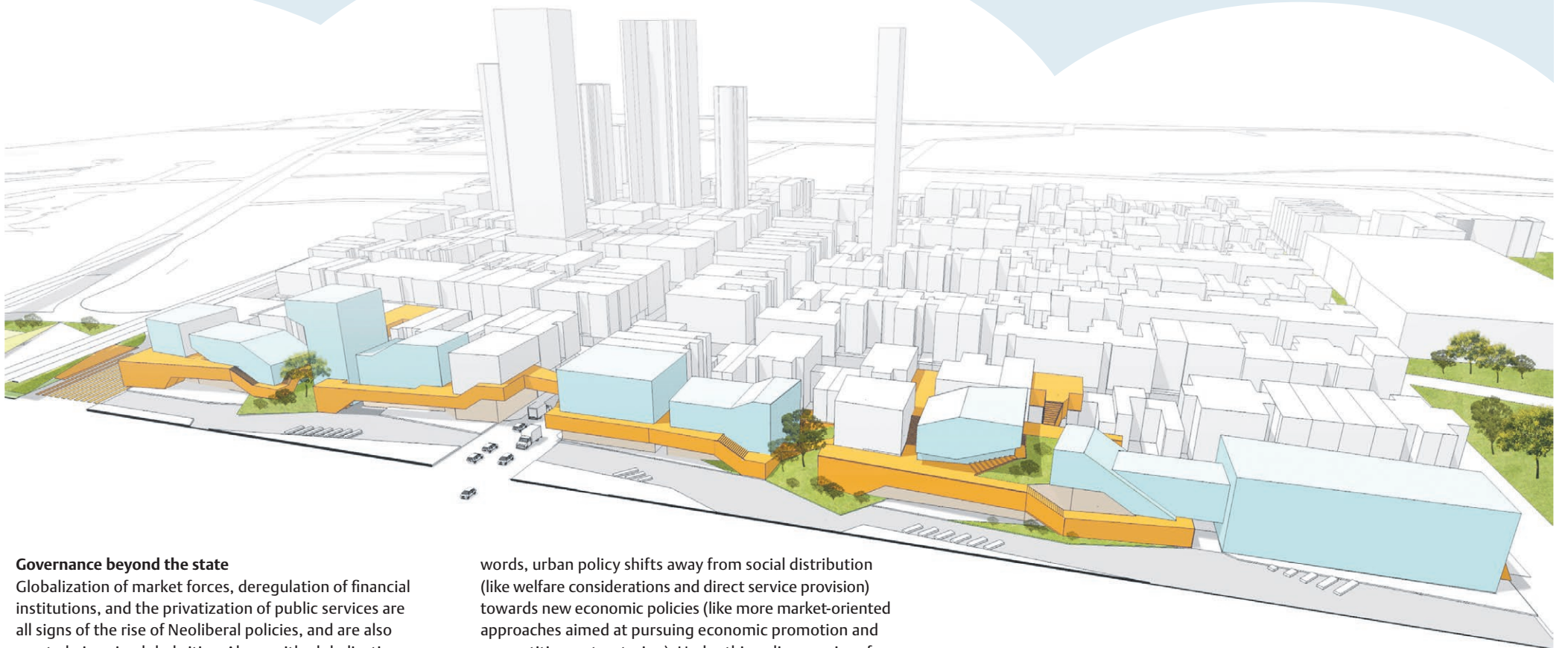


Alternative thinking within the neoliberal framework

With the rise of Neoliberal policies, cities, especially global cities, are experiencing large-scale urban regeneration. During this process, specific social groups are absent from the decision-making processes. There is exclusion of people and territories that, from the perspective of the dominant interests of global capitalism, shift to a position of social irrelevance. Is there an alternative urban solution for the development of these 'black holes'? Kowloon City, one of the urban 'black holes', will be a case study in the Hong Kong context.

Ting Wen



Governance beyond the state

Globalization of market forces, deregulation of financial institutions, and the privatization of public services are all signs of the rise of Neoliberal policies, and are also most obvious in global cities. Along with globalization and the liberalization process there is the emergence of a constellation of managerial practices for governance within a generic Neoliberal frame. Its essence is the Foucauldian notion of governmentality: power working as network. Planners and local authorities adopt a more proactive and entrepreneurial approach aimed at identifying market opportunities and assisting private investors to take advantage of them. In this way, more social actors enter the governmentality, including private agents, designers, architects, planners, non-governmental organizations, civil society groups, corporations, and so on. This new urban governance is defined by Erik Swyngedouw as 'Governance beyond the State'.

Advances in telematics changed capital manipulation and the world market. Decision making does not necessarily have to be in the exchange location but can be situated in better places, with more favourable circumstances. Cities are trying to find their competitive positions in the context of rapidly changing global conditions. Political transformations are initiated in an attempt to align local situations with the requirements of the international economic system. In other

words, urban policy shifts away from social distribution (like welfare considerations and direct service provision) towards new economic policies (like more market-oriented approaches aimed at pursuing economic promotion and competitive restructuring). Under this policy a series of large-scale urban development projects are implemented by a combination of public- and private-sector interests.

Urban regeneration is presented as an opportunity to change economic hierarchies and reposition the city on the map of the global landscape. The city's elite institutions indulge themselves in drawing a splendid image of the 'good business climate' for the outsider, investor, developer, businessman, or the wealthy tourist, and sells the image of being a cultural centre and tourist destination. While the reorientation in attitudes to urban governance that has taken place in advanced capitalist countries, the 'managerial' approach so typical of the 1960s, has steadily given way to 'entrepreneurialism'.

'Pluralistic governance' or 'democratic deficit': the Hong Kong story

Neoliberal policy is celebrated for its co-ordinated action of different actors, the building of network governance, and more efficient forms of urban management. Is it really so perfect? Hong Kong, being synonymous with Neoliberalism, can be a case study.

Above and below: Urban interventions in Kowloon City. Compressed in the most dynamic way to promote street life and the community, orange represents commercial, blue cultural, and white residential functions.

From the positive non-interventionism of the 1970s to the information age of the twenty-first century, Hong Kong has experienced economic take-off due to Neoliberalism. The large-scale construction of physical infrastructure and hyper-concentrated facilities has enabled Hong Kong to offer its intermediaries greater capacity to compete. The city has become a paradise for investors. In 1970, the first supermarket opened and then the first department store. Old blocks were demolished, and massive urban interventions sprang up like mushrooms. However, behind the vivid, booming images of that highly centralized CBD core is a large population being suburbanized in comparatively low-standard accommodation and with income inequality. The so-called shift from centralist, formalized, bureaucratized, hierarchical, top-down planning to decentralized, informal, flexible, bottom-up and networked planning approaches are coming hand-in-hand with increasing urban asymmetry.

In traditional Hong Kong streets, commercial life spills out from the shophouse, with merchandise on the sidewalk. Various street markets and hawker stalls make the street life more dynamic. Sellers often join the lively commercial atmosphere. Buyers and sellers often know each other and may develop longstanding trading relationships. People are embedded in a larger network of social relationships, including family and friends, which engenders loyalty as well as obligations. By comparison, in the new 'business climate', market rules tend to evolve slowly away from the egalitarian and into one form dominated by official controls outside, and more privileged controls inside. Taxes, import regulations, the imposition of pricing structure and the pressure on small businesses becomes too great. Only big company or brand names have the ability to locate in certain places.

In this situation, specific social groups, like those with low-income, racial minorities, immigrants, and certain types of workers, are absent from the city centre or other 'developed' areas. There is exclusion of people and territories which, from the perspective of the dominant interests of global capitalism, shift to a position of social irrelevance. It leads to the constitution of what Manuel Castells calls, the 'black holes of informational capitalism'. The beautiful pictures described by the social elites who indulge in the Neoliberal framework are based on an increasing inequality in the inhabited environment.



Kowloon City redevelopment

Challenges for Kowloon City redevelopment

In order to change the monocentric urban structure and regenerate the 'black holes', the Hong Kong Metroplan Selected Strategy proposed in 1991 a redevelopment framework for the Kai Tak Airport that envisaged a mix of public and private housing, new commercial developments, and high-tech industrial zones. Later on, in the Hong Kong 2011 Policy Report it was pointed out that 'the development of the Kai Tak area, the South East Kowloon has the potential to become the second "Central" in Hong Kong'. Kowloon City, located besides the former Kai Tak Airport, is part of the new CBD framework.

Kowloon City, or *Lung Shing* in Cantonese, is a sub-district and is named after Kowloon Walled City. A large part of the population here are Asian immigrants who came through the Airport. Due to cheap living they managed to settle down. The dominant typology in the area is the shophouse, most with affordable prices. Residents therefore get the chance to start small business (like restaurants). As more and more exotic restaurants appeared, Kowloon City achieved a reputation for its special Food Street.

As time went by, and most of the surrounding areas were regenerated into modern blocks, Kowloon City still retained its old city fabric and lifestyle. The cheaper living costs also attracted more inhabitants, socially excluded from the city centre. On one hand the community successfully keeps the lively social and commercial life traditional to Hong Kong; on the other, outdated infrastructure becomes a big barrier to future prosperity. Statistics indicate that the median monthly domestic household income of the community is HK\$13,600, which is quite low compared to the average standard of the district, which is HK\$20,000. The employment rate, especially for women, is also 6 percent lower than the average. Even among the working population, 20 percent engage in home business and around 43 percent work in the relatively low-income labour industries like manufacturing, construction, wholesale, and transport. More than a quarter of the population is facing difficulty in finding better jobs in more developed districts. They have no choice but to remain trapped in place. Social exclusion, inequality in facilities, and poverty are common problems for residents in Kowloon City, making it one of the biggest of the urban 'black holes'.

South East Kowloon project seems like an opportunity for the area to get rid of this regrettable *status quo*. The splendid regeneration plans will help locals get better connected to the infrastructure network and create more employment.



However, as mentioned above, the dearth of decision making for specific social groups, namely the majority of the local population, will also bring a risk of unequal gentrification. How to balance the demand of development and prevent its valuable identity from being swallowed up by the big Neoliberal urban interventions will be the biggest challenge for the Kowloon City redevelopment.

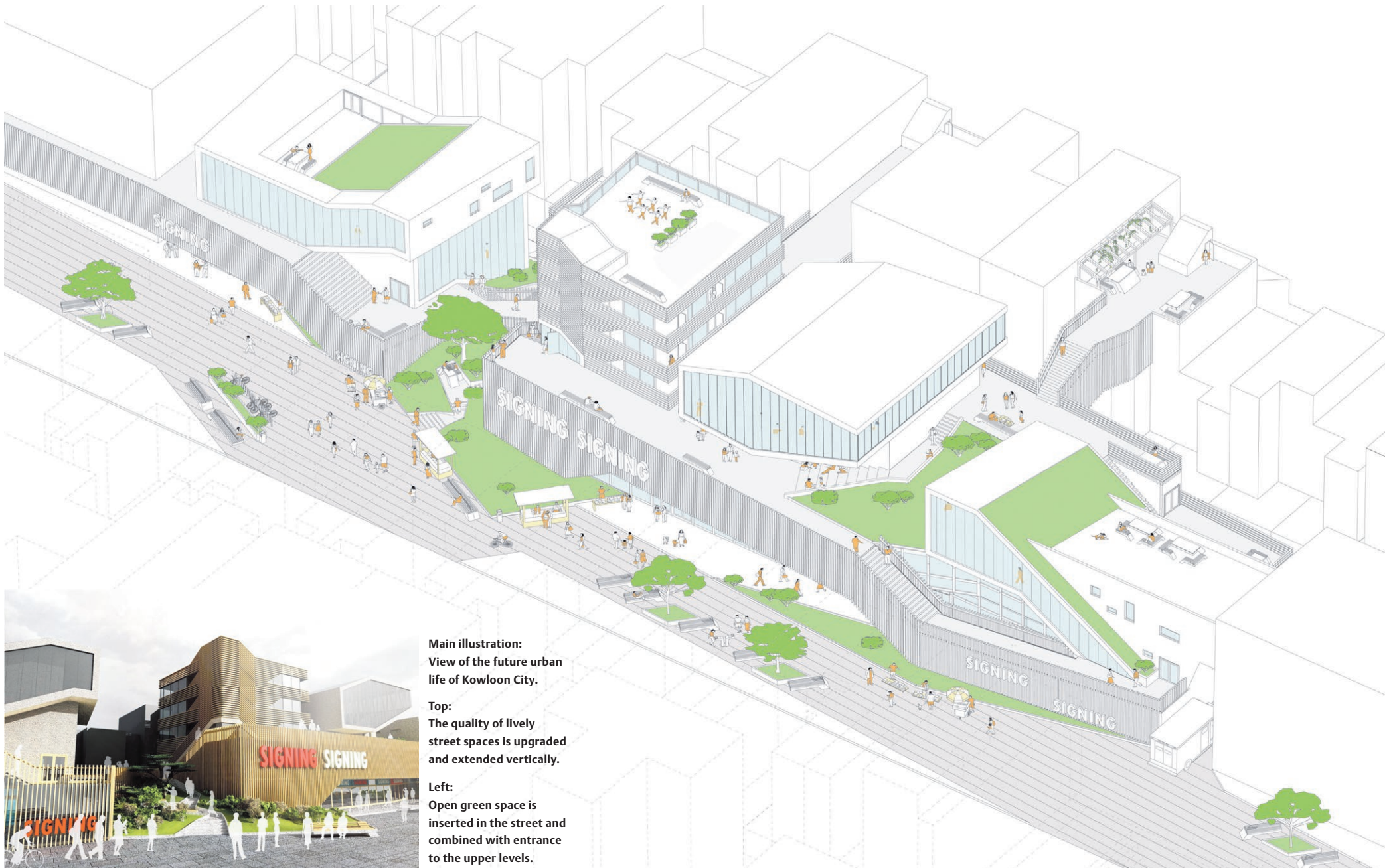
Alternative urban strategies

Responding to the challenges of the Kowloon City redevelopment, the most important consideration of the design is to include local inhabitants in future scenarios and pre-empt their exclusion. The regeneration strategies should be based on the advantages of existing intimate social relations, but without fundamentally changing the social structure. On these principles, the main urban strategies are as follows:

- 1) Compress the scale of the urban intervention, only launching it in the most promoting place,
- 2) Selectively demolish existing buildings,
- 3) When building new ones, avoid big vertical and volumetric extensions as well as re-enforcing the benefits of the present building typology,
- 4) Keep the street spaces as lively social places, extending them by adding more possibility and flexibility.

The final design maintains the dynamic street life of the community and expands it vertically. There will be the insertion of open green space at different levels. The locals will also have more opportunities for starting their own businesses, but also the developers will get better conditions for building new establishments. In this scenario the inhabitants, developers, investors, and tourists can all benefit from the upgraded urban environment.

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Main illustration:
View of the future urban life of Kowloon City.

Top:
The quality of lively street spaces is upgraded and extended vertically.

Left:
Open green space is inserted in the street and combined with entrance to the upper levels.