



# Designing for Children

- With focus on 'Play + Learn'

## The Significance of Play in the Context of Urban Consumption

Tak Ping Tsang, School of Design, Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong, China,  
sdkith@polyu.edu.hk

**Abstract:** This paper discusses the significance of the roles of play as tactics of production of space [Lefebvre:1974] to counter balance the mainstream value for kids in their daily living in the city of Hong Kong where economic achievement as the ultimate value in life is deeply rooted in their minds throughout their upbringing.

Two examples of the tactics of production space, one relatively private and one public, are used to illustrate the use of play for education by myself as a father of two, a visual artist and graphic designer teaching visual communication design in a university in Hong Kong. By making use of what are available in social institutions such as shopping malls, the tactics aim at building up kids' awareness of the influences of consumerism.

*Key words: Design, Play, Consumption, Urban life.*

### 1. Introduction

The urban life of Hong Kong was started by the British rule in 1842 until the midnight of June 30, 1997. In the 155 years of colonial rule all government policies, be it political, social, cultural, educational etc, aimed at two objectives, (economic) prosperity and stability. In fact, they are two in one. After the Chinese Mainland government took up the sovereignty on July 1, 1997, as a matter of stability, the City was classified as Special Administrative Region (SAR) to distinguish her from the rest of the cities in China in terms of governance. And, the guarantee by both governments during the hangover of the sovereignty was that everything in the SAR would remain unchanged for 50 years. What they referred to were, in fact, economic prosperity and stability. By checking the current

(2009) Policy Address<sup>1</sup> of the Chief Executive of the SAR, we can tell that economy is still the top priority of the SAR governance while democracy is the last to be addressed. The flow of its contents is as follows:

- A. Introduction
- B. Economic Development, Our Priority
- C. Quality Life
- D. Progressive Society
- E. Democracy and Governance, and
- F. Conclusion

The Policy Address reflects the ideology of the SAR Government in the formation of all policies, be it political, cultural, social and educational. Gradually the ideology passes on to all walks of life including the production of space, private and public, as 'natural'. Most of the people accepted it without questioning the rationale behind. As a Hong Kong citizen and a father of two, I am aware of my role as a counter force to help my kids in producing spaces for growth in their social lives, private and public. Lefebvre pointed out that '(Social) space is a (social) product', and 'the space thus produced also serves as a tool of thought and of action [...] in addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power.' (Lefebvre, 1991). I believe that once I can be successful in building up the kids' awareness of the politics of the production of space with their participatory experience of producing space for play, they will be sensitive to the domination and power of all spaces in their lives. Their future actions will become part of their thought processes of self development.

In the last 16 years, I have been creating tactics<sup>2</sup> by making use of what are available in social institutions such as shopping malls of the materialistic society as a means of play to build up my kids' awareness of the influences of consumerism. Five years ago when my elder daughter Kuk Kuk was 11, she was encouraged by my family to go out with friends on her own. Going out, 'chue kai' in Cantonese, the dialect of Hong Kong Chinese, means going out to the street. I, then, found out that she usually spent an hour or so only out there. When compared to my time as kid, I spent most of the time playing on the street.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.policyaddress.gov.hk/09-10/eng/index.html> [Accessed 15 November 2009]

<sup>2</sup> Michel Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life* defines tactic as '...because it does not have a place, a tactic depends on time —it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized "on the wing." Whatever it wins, it does not keep. It must constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into "opportunities."'

One reason being the living condition in Hong Kong was dense and private space at home was scarce. People, especially youngsters, always met friends outside. Public spaces such as the street turned out to be an extension of our home. The living condition doesn't change much ever since. I asked Kuk Kuk why she didn't stay longer with her friends to 'play around on the street'. She replied without thinking too much that there was nothing to play with and streets were boring. The reply reminded me of the subsequent clearing of all street cultures because of the everlasting urban renewal. All public spaces in Hong Kong are being turned into utilitarian consumption space and are under surveillance. For instance, we can only walk in pedestrian passage simply because its function serves as a passage between two points. Likewise, we have to pay if we want to sit down and have a drink in a shopping mall because someone has paid in advance to manage and provide 'the space' for 'other users'. Thus, I tried different ways of play with my kids to re-produce the social space to enrich their upbringing.

#### **Growth Pointers Race- the use of private space as the field of play in social space**

An equilateral triangle pointing upward is drawn by nail polish on the lower end of the fingernail of the thumb of the participants respectively, ie my two kids and I. As the fingernail grows the triangle moves towards the tip of the finger. We checked regularly the positions of the triangles until we had the first one arrived at the tip and became the winner.

The aims are to redefine the 'take-it-for-granted' use of nail polish as image building device of women and to discuss the issues of fairness when there are discrepancies, such as age, among participants (a difference of 37 years between my little boy and I). The game also challenges the school regulation that students are not allowed to wear nail polish in school. The triangles are, in fact, pointers visualizing the speeds of growth. Kids are then aware of different growth rates of different ages. Mine is much lower than theirs. They are then asked to think of ways to improve the rules of the game to entertain the age discrepancies. It is not common to adjust the rules to make them favourable to the adults since adults are usually the rule setters, which makes the kids aware of the power of the domination.

Nail polishes are popularly available in Hong Kong in 2 main chain stores, Sa Sa<sup>3</sup> and Bonjour<sup>4</sup>, which play a significant role in the image building of women. Obviously, the targeted customers are adults but not kids. The subversive nature of the game provides a chance for the kids to transform the stores into art supplies stores, where the original function serves as image building suppliers. The space once produced will stay in the minds of the kids, which can be generalized and applied to other social institutions.

Since the duration of the game lasted for weeks the kids had no choice but have the polish kept on their fingernails while they were in school. It is a long tradition and a generally accepted regulation in Hong Kong education that students at primary and secondary levels (usually aged from 6 to 16) are not allowed to wear cosmetics of any kind. The implication of cosmetics in the school context is that cosmetics triggers students' desire of beautifying themselves and eventually they are distracted from their study. The game provided a chance for my kids and I to discuss broader issues of regulations in school and in the society.

### Hijacking Times Square<sup>5</sup> for play

The public area of Times Square in the shopping area of Causeway Bay, one of the most popular shopping areas in Hong Kong, was supposed to be a 'free' space for the public. A local newspaper, Apple Daily disclosed that the developer, Wharf, in the past 14 years had been renting out the 32 thousand square feet public space of the Square to make profit<sup>6</sup>. And, with the agreement from the government, a total of 19 rules and regulations<sup>7</sup> were set up, to restrict public use including the abandonment of sitting, eating, drinking, performing etc. The 'economic-technological imperatives that colonize space and time' (Kipfer, Stefan and Brenner, 2008) publicly attracted the attention of a good group of

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<sup>3</sup> Sa Sa International Holdings Limited was established in 1978 in Hong Kong. As of today Sa Sa runs more than 150 retail shop and counters in Asia selling more than 400 brands of make-up products.

<sup>4</sup> Bonjour Holdings Limited was established in 1991 and runs 31 retail stores in Hong Kong, Mainland China, Europe, North America, Australia and some Asian countries.

<sup>5</sup> Times Square is a high-end shopping complex located in Causeway Bay, managed by Wharf (Holdings) Limited. Together with Harbour City, a shopping complex located on Kowloon side of Hong Kong, they are the "Heart of the Group". The two represent 47% of total Group assets and 58% of operating profit and account for about 7% of the total value of all goods sold in the entire Hong Kong.

<sup>6</sup> Apple Daily, 27 February 2008. Page A12.

<sup>7</sup> < <http://www.inmediahk.net/node/313547>>[Accessed 28 November 2009]

artists, designers and social activists. It ended up to be a variety of art performances and social actions to challenge 'the arbitrariness of the dominant order' (Kipfer, Stefan and Brenner, 2008) of business-led consumption.

The public space was located in front of the main entrance of the Square. It served as a pedestrian passage. Because of its convenient location people used it as a meeting point although there was no sitting provided. During the hot season of nearly six months of the year the uncovered space remained empty. Passers-by walked as fast as possible for there was not a single tree for hiding away from the sun. There were steps on both entrances of the space. Wheelchairs had to go further down to the back of the space in order to have access. The concept of the space design was to speed up people's motion of entering and leaving the shopping complex without any delay.

Starting in late February 2008, Local Action<sup>8</sup> of which I am a member, held public events with traditional games in weekends to turn the space to a playground for kids and adults to enjoy. We had art performance, reading performance, music, birthday party for the passers-by and even formed a group of pseudo-security guards to protect the participants when they play with what they like in the space. At first, security guards tried to stop our actions by handing out warning letters and stating the rules and regulations repeatedly. At the same time there were under-covered guards video-taping the events. They even called the police to help. Since the space was managed by a private development, police were not supposed to do anything unless there was illegal act. In one occasion, 4 police officers and 8 security guards kept watching a street performer for 3 hours until he finished. The atmosphere changed by the end of March when the government released lists of public facilities in private developments<sup>9</sup>, their attitude changed to be helpful in all aspects such as helping in directing the traffic to make rooms for the performers.

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<sup>8</sup> A group composed of laymen, artists, architects, designers, scholars and activists after the 'Save the Star Ferry' action in 2007, which raised the awareness the whole city of Hong Kong to concern issues of conservation in urban development.

<sup>9</sup> <<http://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/200803/28/P200803280177.htm>>[Accessed 28 November 2009]



Figure. 1 A reading performance for all ages. The single word on each apron together read 'This is public space'. The performers walked with dead slow speed in one line as a queue around the space while reading and the passers-by were invited to join the queue. At one point there were 20 people. Eventually the performance lasted for 3 hours after walking one round.



Figure. 2 Security guard made room for the performers.



Figure.3 Kids and adults played together happily. This kind of activity was not permitted because of the rule and regulations set by the developer.

The playful action of hijacking the space eventually became a social movement to force the government departments, the Lands Department and the Building Department, to compile and release lists of public facilities in private developments on 28 March 2008. The lists showed that there were totally 231 private developments which were 'required under land leases to provide various public facilities, such as open spaces, pedestrian passages and walkways, footbridges, public right of way, public car parks, toilets, etc.' In the case of Times Square, it 'is subject to such a deed of dedication but it is almost unique in that the public passage is also required to serve the purpose of a public open space for passive recreation purposes.' The term 'passive recreation' is weird enough in the sense that it only refers to shopping in the context of the everydayness (Kipfer, Stefan and Brenner, 2008) of Hong Kong people.

## 6. Conclusions

The city of Hong Kong is highly consumption-driven. Everyday life of both private and public sectors are strongly influenced by the ideology top-downed by the government backing up by the business gurus most of whom are land developers and vice versa, which makes the everydayness monotonously focused on shopping. By adding the act of play to the concept of '(social) space is a (social) product' kids are able to apply and create 'something that escapes domestication' (Kipfer, Stefan and Brenner, 2008). The concept together with the act of play forms an appropriate tactic to counter balance the domination power of the government and the businessmen.

The two playful acts cited above are two but one for the ultimate aim is to serve as action to build up concept of (re)producing space in the minds of the kids. At the same time they are also critique and transformation of everyday life in an urban setting. The learning-by-doing approach can be generalized so that kids will not be restricted by the boundaries of the existing institutions, be it private and public.

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