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# Reclaimed Land

## Hong Kong in Transition



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# Introduction

At midnight on 30 June 1997, Hong Kong became a Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China. A city which came into existence under British colonial rule and grew to be a major nodal point in the global capitalist network was belatedly to enter the post-colonial world, experiencing not independence, but absorption into a much larger entity with alien political values. From the point of view of China, the transfer of sovereignty which took place at the mid-point of 1997 was simply a moment in a larger story of selfhood regained: the reclaiming of Hong Kong fed a growing sense of national pride which China's economic resurgence in the post-Cultural Revolution era had encouraged, and which the decline of widespread belief in communist ideology made politically necessary. From the point of view of Hong Kong, however, the end of colonial rule was a much more complicated and even troubling affair. Hong Kong people were being treated as the objects of someone else's historical narrative and not being offered a long-overdue chance to become the subjects of their own.

Dissatisfaction at being excluded from important decisions concerning their own future was prevalent amongst Hong Kong people at the time of the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration, which set the timetable for Hong Kong's return to Chinese sovereignty. It became more intense, however, following the violent suppression of the Beijing democracy movement on 4 June 1989, an event which made the prospect of a smooth convergence with China in 1997 seem much less likely. The colonial government was faced with a rapid erosion of its already shaky political legitimacy in the wake of this bloody crackdown, which Hong Kong residents (many of whom were themselves refugees from the oppressive political environment of the People's Republic of China) watched unfold on their television screens. The bland promises of 'stability and prosperity', which the two sovereign powers had been making, were no longer sufficient to pacify the local population, and growing demands for democracy were heard. Powerful advocates of legislative reform emerged and Hong Kong became politicized as never before. Given the unrepresentative nature of the colonial legislature, it was perhaps not surprising that much of the new concern for



empowerment was not simply directed into party political activity, but found its expression on the streets in the form of marches and demonstrations. The most massive of these had occurred directly following the Beijing crackdown, but such spatialized manifestations of protest were to become common in Hong Kong right through the handover period.

The rise of a local consciousness in Hong Kong, fed by the trauma of the Beijing crackdown, shattered the fragile consensus between Britain and China which had prevailed in the early post-Joint Declaration era. The colonial government, now seriously lacking in legitimacy, announced an extensive programme of public works as part of an attempt to restore morale and boost economic growth in the run up to the handover. The centrepiece of this programme was a new international airport, to be located on the far side of Lantau Island at Chek Lap Kok. Although construction of this airport took place almost unobserved by the vast majority of Hong Kong's inhabitants on account of its remote location, the creation of the road and rail links necessary to connect the airport to the city itself was a much more high-profile affair. The waterfront of the Central district of Hong Kong Island, for instance, was

completely transformed due to extensive reclamation of land from the harbour and by the subsequent construction on that newly created site. The handover and the fears its approach had provoked were leading to radical changes in even the physical topography of the city.

As the Joint Declaration era united front between the two sovereign powers continued to unravel, even the new airport became a bone of contention between them. Despite the undoubted temporary boost this massive civil engineering project gave to the economy, it was not a widely popular project locally. The point came then when the colonial government had to make a strategic surrender to the growing local demands for political participation in order to sustain its position through to the handover, and this moment occurred when the last British Governor, Christopher Patten, announced plans for constitutional development in his 7 October 1992 Policy Address to the Legislative Council. In elections held on 17 September 1995, a short-lived wholly-elected legislature eventually came into being in which pro-democracy parties were strongly represented. Democratic politicians such as Martin Lee and Christine Loh played major roles in this period, and enjoyed widespread public respect.

Immediately following the handover, this quasi-democratic legislature, which Britain had allowed Hong Kong at no price to itself, was dismantled and replaced by an appointed equivalent packed with supporters of the new sovereign power. In due course another elected legislature came into existence, but this was of a considerably less representative nature. Civic-level government disappeared altogether in this rollback of electoral rights, with the two municipal councils being abolished around the end of 1999. In the economic as well as the political sphere there was a sense of things moving backwards: the arrival of the pan-Asian economic crisis just after the handover reduced further the already limited freedom of manoeuvre of the new Hong Kong Special Administrative Region government. Even the sense of material progress, which had provided some consolation in the colonial era for the lack of democratic development, was now to disappear. A rapid and harsh adjustment in property prices by about half was to come as a rude awakening to those who had bought into the dream of ever-rising asset prices which had been fuelled by the government's active control of the land market. The rule of law, which Britain frequently claimed as its legacy to Hong Kong, was also to be tested at an early date. Hong Kong's promised

power of final legal adjudication turned out to be less than complete in practice when the Hong Kong SAR government successfully applied to the National People's Congress Standing Committee in Beijing to 'reinterpret' the Basic Law governing Hong Kong after the handover, in order to overturn a judgment of the Court of Final Appeal to which it took exception.

Because of this erosion of freedoms in the post-handover period, and the loss at the same time of possibilities for providing economic palliatives to the population, the post-handover government had much the same shaky sense of legitimacy as its colonial predecessor. The feeling of local identity which the approach of the handover had helped intensify still remained strong, and the task of inculcating in Hong Kong people a sense of being national citizens of a communist state was clearly a difficult one. In many ways that task was attempted by means of spatial strategies. Firstly, colonial symbols were replaced with Chinese national ones on governmental buildings and elsewhere. Secondly, certain shifts in the topography of power occurred, as when Hong Kong's new Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa chose not to move into Government House, the home of the colonial governors, but to continue living in his



previous residence. The Central Government Offices gained a new importance as the seat of government as a result. Thirdly, new spaces of national significance began to emerge in Hong Kong. Prime amongst these was the Extension to the Convention and Exhibition Centre in Wanchai, which had been the site of the handover ceremony itself. Following the handover the nationalistic associations of this site were deepened through the placement of a reunification monument nearby, and through the employment of a public space adjoining the Extension as the location for an annual Chinese National Day flag-raising ceremony.

Just as spatial strategies were adopted for the promotion of national meanings to the Hong Kong populace, so too by spatial strategies were such meanings frequently contested. Alternative senses of identity competed in the public spaces of Hong Kong, a sign that a discrepancy existed between the constitutional fact of Hong Kong's incorporation within China and the decolonized mentality that most Hong Kong people had acquired well in advance of the actual end of colonial rule. As before the handover there were frequent demonstrations in front of sites of governmental power. The Central Government Offices, now bearing the national emblem

above its entrance, was a prominent target, and the Legislative Council Building was also repeatedly besieged. The latter, indeed, had been invaded just after the transfer of sovereignty at midnight on 30 June 1997 by the Democratic party members of the Legislative Council, who used its balcony to protest against the abrupt termination of their tenure and to call for the establishment of democratic government. Protest also had one site which it made more or less its own – Victoria Park. Built on land reclaimed from the sea in the Causeway Bay area of Hong Kong Island, this municipal park had long been a venue for protests of various kinds, and every year on the anniversary of the June Fourth crackdown it was to become the site of a large-scale memorial rally. Following the handover this nondescript multi-purpose space became the main location on Chinese soil where the memory of the 1989 deaths could be publicly kept alive.

In the pages that follow are to be found a collection of black-and-white photographic images taken between 31 December 1994 and 1 January 2000, the last five years of the millennium but also a period of two-and-a-half years either side of Hong Kong's mid-1997 return to Chinese sovereignty. They have been selected from a

larger body of images which were generated on a daily basis throughout those years, from a participant-observer's photo diary the aim of which was to chronicle in some detail the city's passage through a predetermined moment of history. The images presented here combine mosaic-like to form a record of that period of transition, the outline story of which has already been sketched above.

Beginning the documentation of a historical moment so far in advance of its occurrence like this would not have been possible with many of the other significant events of the late twentieth century. It would be hard to imagine such a photographic project about the fall of the Berlin Wall, for instance, since that event – like most others of similar import – could simply not have been predicted with any degree of precision that far ahead. The future always comes as a surprise, but if the nature of life in Hong Kong after the handover was also something which could not have been predicted beforehand, at least its date was known with a high degree of certainty from as long ago as 1984. For this reason the handover was an event not simply with repercussions, but one which cast a long shadow in advance of itself, which began to shape the thoughts and actions of people in Hong Kong

many years before it occurred. Time itself came more to the foreground than usual. Instead of passing by, it seemed to run out, and a mood of premature retrospection was common, an imagining oneself as if looking back from the future on a present which had already become the past.

Because of its special relationship to temporality, photography is a particularly apposite tool for conveying a sense of a particular historical moment. Paintings have often been used to specify a moment in history, but such images were often painted much later than the time to which they refer, and textual sources (whether of a primary nature such as diaries or a secondary nature such as historical essays) are similarly retrospective. Photographs belong in a direct and unalterable way to the moment when the film was exposed, hence their peculiar quality of speaking in the present tense about an event that is always already in the past at the time of viewing. A diary on the other hand, even if it employs the present tense, may have been written at the end of the day or even later, and can in any case be subject to rewriting with the benefit of historical hindsight. Although it is possible to derive from written records of a period information which the person creating the



record was not consciously aware of, written accounts are by their nature highly selective. A photograph, by contrast, because of its tendency towards a repleteness and evenness of vision, can preserve information of historical value which the photographer had no understanding of at the time or intention to document.

To emphasize a photograph's indexical connection to the moment it depicts is not of course to present photography as a neutral or objective tool. As much as any other mode of representation, a photograph offers an interpretation of the world rather than simply a true copy of it, and the images presented here are quite overtly intended as the product of one subjective or situated viewpoint. Although often treated as nothing more than a helpful servant of historical investigation, a less logocentric view would enable us to see that photography can itself be a medium of historical investigation and analysis. Because of its concern with concrete particularities, photography can work against abstracting and simplifying styles of historical narrative, which in the case of Hong Kong would be those ideologically laden accounts which want to tell a comfortable story of Hong Kong's joyous return to the motherland or of an honourable and dignified end of

empire. Nations are the normal subjects of textbook historical accounts, and so such British colonial or Chinese national histories of Hong Kong in the handover years will undoubtedly be written by those who have an investment in doing so. But the more difficult task of suggesting a local Hong Kong perspective on the period of the transfer of sovereignty is one these images want to aid. As with alternative histories everywhere, such a localized history of Hong Kong would be one which relies on memory as a tool against the closures of the official narratives and, with its stubbornly perfect recall, photography has a valuable role to play in the construction of such a fragile counter-story.

Not all photographs of the handover serve to interrupt nationally framed histories, of course. One can think of images such as those showing Hong Kong civil servants taking their post-handover loyalty oath which serve Chinese national ideology perfectly. Equally it is possible to identify many photos in the service of a colonial nostalgia, such as those showing Patten heavy with emotion at the British farewell ceremony. Although guided by quite different agendas, these two types of image tend in certain respects to be remarkably similar. They tend to be photos of ceremonial events associated

with the handover itself, and often employ colour and a certain visual richness to invoke a degree of glamour. This focus on the handover itself, and on things and events which have been deliberately created to be photographed and observed, is almost an inevitable consequence of the fact that most photojournalists covering the event were only in Hong Kong for a relatively short period of time. Like travel writers, photojournalists working under such circumstances are almost condemned to a world of surfaces (which are often carefully managed appearances), and the news media's need for images legible to those without much background to the events and without much time to invest in looking almost guarantees an elimination of complexities which can approach the clichéd.

In contrast to that fixation on the moment of the handover itself, the images presented here consciously adopt the long-term view, and take time to wander away from what may seem to be the main historical plot, which can in fact be merely a consciously created official political theatre. Often informal and personal in tone, they search out fragments and oblique views rather than seeking the illusion of a well-framed completeness, and sacrifice an easy immediate legibility in the hope of

gaining a more nuanced understanding. Such an understanding is sought not just within individual images, but across the assembled sequence as a whole, a practice not too dissimilar from that with which a film constructs meaning from a montage of separate shots. The handover is thought of not so much as a particular moment in mid-1997, but as a process occurring over a much longer period of time. At the level of economic life and physical infrastructure, the integration of Hong Kong with southern China was well underway before the handover itself arrived yet, at the level of identity or consciousness, the question of whether Hong Kong people can be brought to adopt the kind of patriotic understanding which would please the leaders in Beijing is still an open one, even in the new millenium. The replacement of one sovereign power's flag by another's at midnight on 30 June 1997 in itself changed remarkably little in the broader scheme of things, even though the long-term consequences of that piece of symbolism may indeed be great.

While offering a personal account of Hong Kong history during the transition period, this collection of images also embodies an awareness that the people it shows themselves have a sense of history, and can be found

engaging in practices which are concerned with keeping memory alive. An illusion that only the professional historian is capable of preserving a sense of the past is hard to sustain in the face of images of the June Fourth memorial rallies in Victoria Park, with their solemn focus on remembrance of a traumatic moment in modern Chinese history which the state itself has no desire to recall. Such practices of memory do not necessarily have to engage with events at a national scale however, and equally poignant in its own way is Tai O housewife Wong Wai-king's informal museum of life in that unique rural settlement. Just as concerned with keeping alive connections with the past are the rituals and performances associated with particular customary festivals, which offer a cyclical sense of time in contrast to the linear one, the dominance of which the approach of the handover only served to accentuate.

Just as one can talk of practices of memory, so one can talk of practices of forgetting. In contrast to the cyclical sense of time conveyed by rituals such as those associated with the Hungry Ghost festival is the sense of progress conveyed by grand works of construction which speak of a march forward towards ever greater prosperity. The forest of skyscrapers on Hong Kong

Island, each seemingly taller than its predecessors, is not just a blind consequence of actual rising prosperity but in some sense a consciously intended image of hoped-for prosperity as well. Certainly one can argue this in the case of individual buildings where architectural design may consciously embody a rhetoric of material growth that its owners would like to project – the publicity material for I.M. Pei's Bank of China Tower, for instance, claimed it resembles the form of growing bamboo. Such buildings seem to want to distract us both from a consideration of the past and from less optimistic thoughts about what the future may bring as well. Though such positive rhetoric in concrete, glass and steel may often be a commercial one, it does have its governmental counterpart. The airport building programme following the 1989 Beijing crackdown has already been mentioned, and the buoyant optimism of the Convention and Exhibition Centre Extension with its roof form supposedly recalling a bird taking off into flight also needs to be noted, as does the futuristic Cyberport project hatched by the post-handover government in the face of the economic recession.

Questions of temporality have been to the fore in the immediately preceding discussion, as indeed they will



be throughout the pages that follow, but this book is also deeply concerned with spatial considerations. Each image presented will be given a spatial as well as temporal coordinate (photographs having an indexical relation to the place as well as to the time of their making), and in fact the book will employ a spatial logic to present its picture of Hong Kong during the period of transition of sovereignty. The images that follow this introduction will be divided into six sections, each of which concerns itself with a broadly different kind of space and with the forms of life which occur within it.

The first section will introduce the spaces of commerce and consumption. Here we will meet the Hong Kong of tall office buildings and shopping malls, the most earnestly contemporary and amnesiac spaces of the city to which its image as a global business centre and shopper's paradise is most closely tied. This is a space in rapid transformation, the voracious appetite of which is fuelled by demolition of older structures and by the reclamation of land from the harbour.

In the second section we examine official and civic space. Governmental and military spaces and structures are

the ones which were most directly affected by the handover itself, and thus questions of power will be most directly addressed at this point. This is not simply a question of the replacement of British colonial symbols by Chinese national ones, but also of the contestation of sites of state power by sections of the local community, and of the usurpation of civic space in order to express alternative political viewpoints.

The third section looks at spaces of circulation. Here are examined the developments of Hong Kong's transport infrastructure, such as the construction of the new airport which has so changed the city's centre of gravity. The harbour, because of which the city came into being in the first place and grew to be such a significant trading hub, is also considered at this point.

This is followed by a section in which the older parts of the city are treated. In contrast to the recent construction met in earlier parts of the book will be the more established neighbourhoods seen here, which still reveal traces of Hong Kong's past and provide sites for inherited patterns of life to continue.

Customary practices will also be a major feature of the next section, in which rural and outlying island life is considered. Change is visible even in these locations (with agriculture no longer the heart of village life in the way it had been in the past), but a strong sense of locality has nevertheless survived.

If the preceding two sections offer much evidence of ways of life which stand in contrast to the alienation and shallow consumer gratification on offer in the more contemporary parts of the city, then the final section provides proof that communion and creativity are not solely to be found in residual cultural practices, but also in those with a determinedly contemporary edge. This last part of the book looks at the sites of cultural production in Hong Kong, in which a vibrant and distinctly local cultural scene emerged during the pre-handover period that was in some ways a counterpart to the political self-awareness which developed in the same time frame. To describe this scene as local is not in any sense to say that it lacked a cosmopolitan quality, and many overseas cultural practitioners visited Hong Kong during that time, perhaps more than ever before.

This local cultural scene developed against the grain of Hong Kong's manic materialism, and came to light more in marginal and sometimes temporary niches than in the more formal spaces for high culture with which the city had adorned itself during the early Joint Declaration era.

The partial typology of topographies presented here pretends neither to comprehensiveness nor to objectivity. It offers a personal perspective on Hong Kong which is skeptical concerning much that others have praised, but which also finds a great deal that it believes deserves to be acclaimed and more widely known. As the book unfolds, positive material of the latter kind comes more and more to predominate, with the convivial tending to displace the alienating, and personal expression tending to displace ready-made consumer goods. Both the dark and the light have been deemed worthy of recording for posterity, but it is the author's sincere hope that the reader will readily discover in these pages the fascination with Hong Kong and the esteem for its residents which have inspired the undertaking of this project.

# The Emporium

## Spaces of Commerce and Consumption

Above all else, Hong Kong's image in the world is that of a place of trade, a quintessentially open capitalist marketplace perched at the door of China. In visual terms, this image translates into a view of a forest of tower blocks, a sort of Manhattan of the East, and indeed the tall buildings of Central – the business district of Hong Kong Island – do house the headquarters of numerous financial and trading companies. To many, Central stands for Hong Kong itself: its architectural structures feature in tourist publicity for the city, and visitors often make it the first stop on their itinerary. Even the tram ride up to the Peak or the short Star Ferry journey over to the Tsim Sha Tsui waterfront have as their primary goal the attainment of interesting viewpoints on the Island skyline of which Central is the main focal point. Photographic images in guidebooks and on postcards have already singled out these particular perspectives on the city as paradigmatic in nature.

In this opening section of the book, the tower blocks of Central and of other commercial districts of Hong Kong will be the focus, as will the shopping malls which are often to be found at the feet of these office towers, but which also inhabit residential housing developments, transport interchanges and other strategic locations outside the downtown areas themselves. These malls and other prestige shopping areas further enhance Hong Kong's image as a place of trade, but at a retail rather than wholesale level: this is Hong Kong as the shopper's paradise, the ultimate consumer emporium.

Often taken as straightforward evidence of Hong Kong's economic vibrance, the commercial and consumer spaces





of the city are instead viewed here as sites of rhetorical claims for such prosperity and progress, or places where the seductiveness of consumer culture is manufactured. This latter seductiveness is produced by means of shop window displays, for example, or by the glamour of an elaborate shopping environment as a whole. If the architectural structures of Central convey a sense of economic progress, it is at least in part because the buildings themselves are designed to connote such messages of prosperity and growth, sometimes simply through a not-so-subtle rhetoric of scale.

As well as seeing buildings in this way as semiotic entities as much as functional ones, one can talk of the messages that buildings give in a more literal sense. First and foremost, there are the commercial messages conveyed by the advertising signs attached to buildings. Such illuminated hoardings, often suspended over adjacent streets, are a distinctive feature of the Hong Kong cityscape which have been joined more recently by an increasing number of digital display screens, such as that at Times Square in Causeway Bay. In addition, there are the illuminated decorations which cover the facades of Hong Kong buildings (particularly those



facing on to the harbour) at a certain time of the year, specifically that between Christmas and Chinese New Year. These upbeat seasonal messages about prosperity, entirely consonant with the commercial interests of their sponsors, were supplemented during the handover year by illuminated signs conveying politic expressions of joy at the return of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty. Even Jardine House, headquarters of the trading company most reviled by the Chinese government because of its links with the opium trade during an earlier era, saw fit to join in this spectacle of patriotic sentiment, but Citic Tower, home of a major mainland company, had one of the more prominent displays. Citic



◀ *D'Aguilar Street at night, near the junction with Queen's Road Central. 10 April 1995.*

◀ *Escalators, The Landmark, night. 1 July 1996.*

▲ *Office tower at night, Canton Road, Tsim Sha Tsui. 15 May 1996.*

Tower (along with other buildings such as Central Plaza in Wanchai) also wore an illuminated decoration to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of communist rule in China, which occurred on 1 October 1999. The millennium again saw it joining in the pageantry, and at that time, as during Christmases and regular New Year's eves, the decorated buildings fronting the harbour formed a backdrop for festive crowds. Because of its consumerist rituals, Christmas has a special relationship to the commercial spaces of the city not shared by other annual festivals, although milling crowds can appear in the commercial districts even after most shops are shut on New Year's eve. During the millennium New Year's eve, for instance, Nathan Road, the main shopping artery in Tsim Sha Tsui, was closed to traffic to provide more room for the people who had gathered there. Because Hong Kong lacks, for better or worse, the legible public spaces of a city such as Beijing, such commercial thoroughfares must perforce often serve as the local equivalent.

Many of the buildings close to the waterfront have been constructed on land that has been reclaimed from the sea and, during the last years of the 1900s, that process



▲ Neon signage on a night club, Lockhart Road, Wanchai. 10 March 1996.

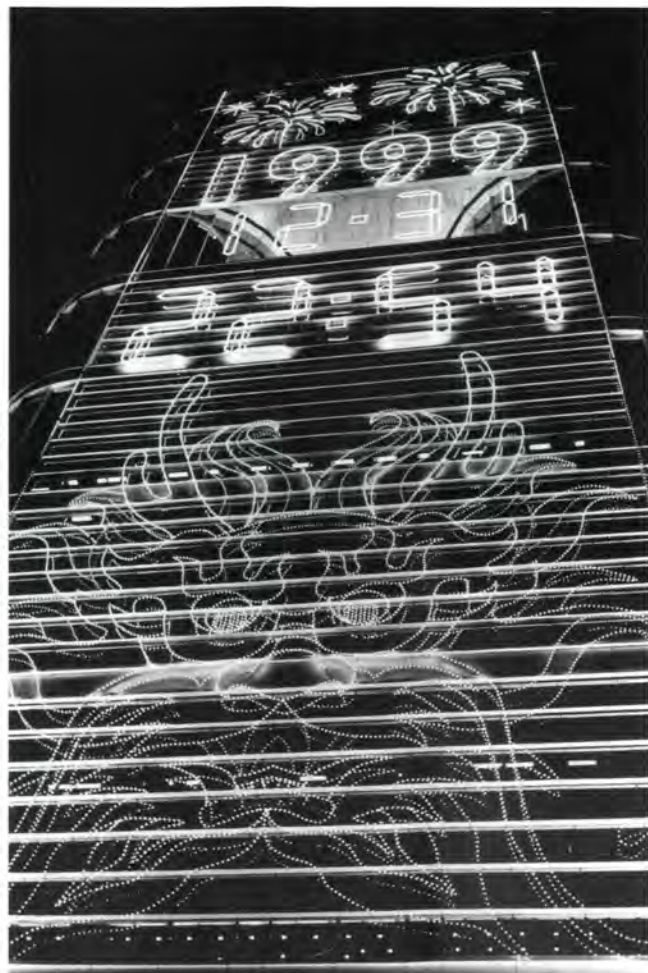




of reclamation and construction continued apace. Large tracts of land were reclaimed from the harbour in Central and in West Kowloon, for instance, and construction has already taken place in those areas, especially for airport-related facilities such as the Central airport express terminal. Adjacent to that new transport interchange is one of the most recent of the large tower blocks to appear in Central, One International Finance Centre, the construction of which is documented here by way of an example. Not all new structures go up on recently reclaimed land, however, and demolition is thus an inevitable counterpart to the rapid transformation the city's urban space has recently been seeing. Swire House and the Hilton Hotel are two of the most prominent structures in Central to have disappeared during the last five years of the millennium, the site of the latter being now already occupied by the Cheung Kong Center. Although relatively simple in form, this latter building has an elaborate exterior lighting scheme capable of

◀ *'The East is Red', neon sign for a store selling Chinese medicine products, Wanchai. 27 October 1997.*

◀ *Illuminated Chinese New Year message on a building façade, Tsim Sha Tsui. 12 February 1999.*



being programmed to display subtle shifts in colour over time. The seasonal decorations of other buildings have become a year-round possibility for this landmark commercial building, as they have for The Center, the bands of light on whose facade constantly change in hue, giving it the look of a gigantic Christmas tree.

This constant transformation of the cityscape serves to erase traces of the past, and given also the optimistic, future-orientated architectural rhetoric of the tower blocks which populate the Central business district, a peculiarly amnesiac environment is the result. Real locality and history have disappeared from this part of town under the onslaught of urban growth and its accompanying architectural spectacle of contemporaneity, although simulated equivalents can sometimes be found. One example is Grand Millennium Plaza, where a fake public square complete with a fountain (but without too many places where visitors can sit or linger) is flanked by a building which seems to recall, by its architectural allusion to English parish churches of the Gothic style, some older more face-to-

◀ Citic Tower, with illuminated sign featuring a countdown to the millennium. 31 December 1999.



face communal setting. The ultra-modernist form of the K.Wah Centre in North Point may imitate a form found in neolithic Chinese Jade carvings, but such conscious traditionalistic references are not the same as survivals of actual historical traces. The minimalist bulk of Exchange Square's futuristic towers may be counterbalanced by a pair of Elizabeth Frink sculptures of water buffaloes, offering a generalized reference back to Hong Kong's agricultural past, but at the same time they participate in the general rhetoric about economic progress – symbols for a 'bull market' being after all entirely apposite for a building housing the stock exchange. Slightly more specific in its historical reference, but equally concerned to serve up the past to



present commercial interests, is the curious Whampoa Gardens shopping mall: built in the shape of an ocean liner, as if marooned on dry land, in the middle of a housing estate, it recalls the dockyard which once stood on the site.

◀ *Times Square, with electronic billboard.*  
23 February 1997.

▲ *Escalators into the shopping mall, Times Square,*  
*with view of older buildings opposite. 5 March 1996.*





From its inside, the Whampoa Gardens liner is revealed as just another attempt to infuse a little glamour or excitement into the shopping experience. In other malls this is attempted by bubble lifts (Times Square), by the incorporation of an ice rink into the shopping space as an object of spectacle as much as use (Taikoo Shing Cityplaza, Festival Walk, Dragon Centre), or even the installation of a roller coaster across the top of a central atrium (Dragon Centre). Bright lights and reflective surfaces are standard tools, while escalators often draw attention to themselves (in Times Square there is a circular escalator that mimics the glamorous double



staircases found in older buildings with palatial pretensions). As much the cathedrals of Hong Kong capital as its prestige bank headquarters buildings, the more recent of the city's shopping malls offer a vision of salvation through consumption. Peddling the signifiers of an elite lifestyle they are also simultaneously selling a materialistic myth of progress that wishes to distract from more politicized visions of the good life and how

◀ *Reclamation in progress, Central. 20 October 1995.*

▲ *Reclamation in progress, Central. 5 December 1997.*



it might be attained. In this task they follow the footsteps of the Japanese department stores which did so much to introduce Hong Kong people to the array of luxury consumer items, but which have now perhaps seen their day. In the wake of the pan-Asian economic crisis, which hit Hong Kong immediately following the handover and showed the shallowness of the post-Joint Declaration promise by the two sovereign powers of continued prosperity for Hong Kong, they were the first shopping environments to show marked signs of suffering. Matsuzakaya and Daimaru in Causeway Bay were both to close, although Sogo was still there at the turn of the century despite troubles being faced by its Japanese parent company.

Most shops and restaurants were to suffer to some extent in the extended economic downturn, but since shopping and dining out in Hong Kong can be done at all levels

◀ *The Hilton Hotel, Central, under wraps awaiting demolition. 8 September 1995.*

◀ *Site formerly occupied by the Hilton Hotel, with foundations for the Cheung Kong Center visible, view from the revolving restaurant of the Furama Hotel. 20 May 1997.*



of luxury, those wholly excluded from the consumer realm were relatively few. Prominent amongst these latter were the Filipino domestic workers, who on Sundays take over the abandoned commercial heart of the city and make it their own. Unable to afford bought leisure opportunities and sit-down meals, they consume snacks prepared in advance and temporarily create from an unsympathetic environment the closest that Central ever sees to a real community.



◀ Cheung Kong Center under construction, with glimpse (right) of the Hong Kong Bank Building.  
24 October 1997.

◀ Cheung Kong Center under construction, night.  
22 January 1998.