Messy Urbanism

Understanding the "Other" Cities of Asia

Edited by Manish Chalana and Jeffrey Hou

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Through these courses and a number of other collaborative projects on the side, we became interested in not only engaging our students in understanding the complexity of urbanism in the fast-growing and changing region of Asia but also in producing scholarship that utilizes our cross-disciplinary lenses and our collective experiences and expertise. Out of a series of conversations and perhaps from the exhaustion of trying to make sense of the complexity of urbanism in Asia, the notion of "messiness" became something of a revelation—an intellectual starting point for this project and the theme around which we began coalescing our joint inquiry.

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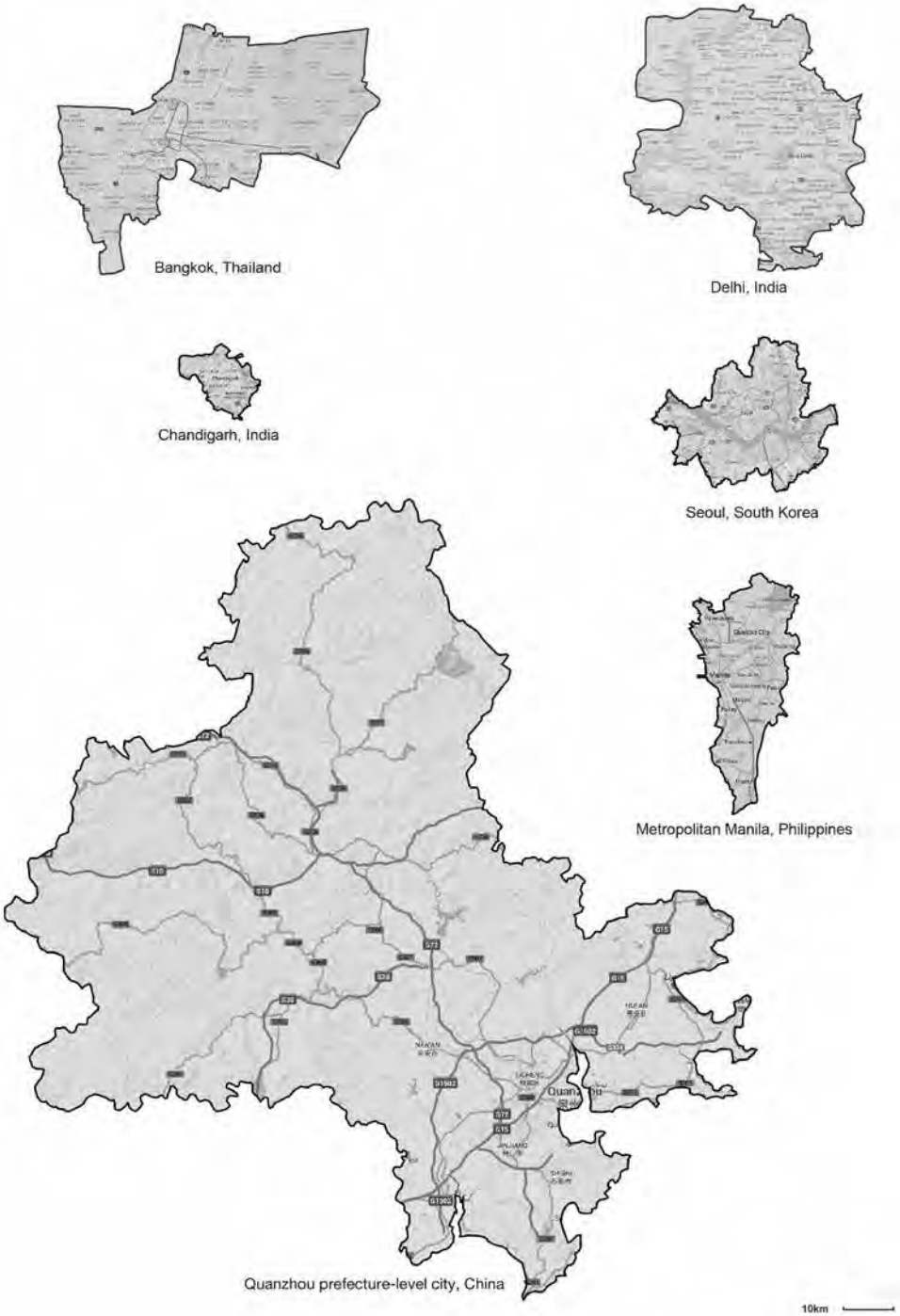

Figure 0.0
Case study cities. Illustration by Weijia Wang.

Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

Tokyo Metropolis, Japan

Hong Kong Special Administrative Region

Shanghai, China

Jakarta, Indonesia

Taipei, Taiwan

10km

Figure 1.0
Case study sites. Illustration by Weijia Wang.

Chapter 1
Untangling the "Messy" Asian City

Jeffrey Hou and Manish Chalana

In the opening scene from Wong Kar Wai's *Chungking Express* (1994), the camera follows one of the film's protagonists, a wig-wearing female drug smuggler, through dimly lit corridors, crowds, and restaurant stalls in what seems like an urban labyrinth. Some passageways look as if they belong to private residences and are yet crowded with foreign faces and strangers, standing elbow to elbow. The narrow spaces lead to slightly wider corridors lined with shops, some open and some closed. Nothing suggests whether one is indoors or outdoors, in a private space or a public space, daytime or evening. No apparent spatial or visual order seems to exist; nothing stands still.

Wong's film was set in the Chungking Mansions, a seventeen-story building located in the center of Tsim Sha Tsui in the Kowloon Peninsula, opposite Hong Kong Island. Surrounded by brand-name hotels and global fashion outlets, as well as an infinite multitude of small restaurants and shops, Chungking Mansions was notorious in the 1980s and 1990s for its reputation as an "urban jungle"—an abyss infested with crimes, prostitutions, drugs, and illegal migrants.[1] As such, the building was also imbued with mystery and fear for most Hong Kong residents. Wong's intention with the opening scene is obvious: in a matter of seconds, the rapid sequence of movements and scenes quickly injects the viewers into an underbelly of the city with all of its stereotypical density, chaos, and messiness.

Today, the infamous Chungking Mansions still stands along the busy and ever touristier Nathan Road in Tsim Sha Tsui. In its nonfictional role, however, the spaces inside the building appear to be rather orderly, in contrast to its depiction in the film. Although one can still encounter restaurant and hotel touts crowding the building's main entrance, once inside the hallway past the money exchange shops, one finds a security guard and a large, illuminated, color-coded directory, showing types and location of shops in clear categories. On the ground floor, the stores are organized into *money exchange, garment, wholesale watch, delicious food, AV & electronic, and mobile phones*. On the upper floors, the shops are identified by *supermarket, arts products, leatherwear, hair cutting, sundries trading, and other business*.

1. The Chinese title of the film, 重慶森林, actually suggests "Chungking Jungle."

The merchandise here is neatly organized in brightly lit shop windows to attract customers, who are largely traders and entrepreneurs from Africa and South Asia. In restaurants at the perimeters of the two-story mall, tables and chairs are arranged so as not to impede the movements of people in the corridors. Many guesthouses still operate on the upper floors of the mammoth building. But, unlike the dark passageways in Wong's film, the spaces are generally well lit, with signs and even colorful murals that direct customers to specific businesses in the building. One can also find toys scattered in the hallways, signs of children and families living in the building.

Apparently, many improvements have been made to Chungking Mansions over the past decade, and new businesses have moved in, including a minimall that can be accessed only through a separate set of escalators that brings customers in directly from the street level. Named after Wong's movie, the Chungking Express minimall has no connections with the rest of the building, however. Inside the shiny minimall, one finds a different ensemble of businesses that cater more to tourists and local customers than to foreign traders. Outside the building, a large electronic billboard hung above the sidewalks flashes images of clean hotel rooms and friendly staff.

The orderliness of the shops and storefronts at Chungking Mansions disguises the less apparent orders not listed in the building directory or Wong's film. According to Gordon Mathews, a Hong Kong–based anthropologist who carried out extensive research on the Chungking Mansions with his students, a variety of mostly ethnic

Figure 1.1
A large electronic billboard now welcomes and greets visitors coming to Chungking Mansions, which was undergoing renovation in 2011. Photograph by Jeffrey Hou.

businesses (both legal and illegal) and business networks can be found inside and around the building. These include guesthouses and restaurants that operate out of private residences that cater to different ethnic groups at different times of the day. These businesses hire illegal migrants at low wages to maintain competitive prices and attract budget-conscious customers. More impressively, the activities associated with Chungking Mansions extend far beyond the actual footprint of the building and its surrounding cityscapes. The concentration of wholesale businesses and multicultural services along with its central location in Hong Kong makes the Chungking Mansions a node of international trading networks that connects South China, South and Southeast Asia, and Africa (Mathews 2011). With such convergence of people and activities, the building is not only a place to find cheap food and lodging for budget travelers but also a place to conduct transactions, access business information, and build networks and relationships, all happening through a constant interplay of order/disorder, formal/informal, legal/illegal, local/global.

The "Messy" Asian City

The interplay and overlays of order/disorder, formal/informal, legal/illegal, local/global constitute an experience that defines not only the Chungking Mansions but also life and urbanism in many Asian cities. They take place on the streets, inside commercial towers, and everywhere in between, involving a multitude of actors and institutions, and their intermediaries. In cities from Mumbai to Manila, vendors occupy sidewalks and street corners, providing food and services to urbanites on the go, including office workers for multinationals. In Taipei, the celebrated Shilin Night Market consists of two coexisting entities—the formalized market building and storefronts vis-à-vis an army of unauthorized vendors who utilize almost all available street surfaces around the market for their businesses. In Shanghai, citizen-dancers once appropriated department store entrances, commercial plazas, and parking lots for their daily performances until such activities were outlawed by the city authority in 2013. In Bangkok, underneath the city's modern Skytrain, vendors and other businesses continue with their activities on the street level, keeping the city alive twenty-four hours a day (Jenks 2003).

Crowded, bustling, layered, constantly shifting, and seemingly messy, these sites and activities possess an order and hierarchy often visible and comprehensible only to their participants, thereby escaping common understanding and appreciation. Yet such spatial, temporal, and socioeconomic messiness (or orders) enables many of the neighborhoods and communities to function effectively and efficiently despite extremely high population densities and limited infrastructure. In some cases, such "order" enables marginalized populations in particular to stake out a place and sustain themselves in the unevenly developed terrains of cities and regions. In other

Figure 1.2
Street vendors and shoppers near the Siam Square in Bangkok, undeterred by the vertical planters installed under the Skytrain station. Photograph by Jeffrey Hou.

instances, entrenched cultural norms and traditional spatial practices persist despite planned upgrading, development, and displacement. Understanding the urbanism and urban life of these cities requires an understanding of these compositions and processes that are often hidden, disguised, underappreciated, or dismissed as simply messy or underdeveloped. At worst, they are stigmatized through a process of "othering," in which messiness becomes an all-encompassing concept for things "disorderly," incomprehensible, and unacceptable. It is such "messiness" and the politics of othering that constitute the focus of this book.

Messiness is simultaneously a range of urban conditions that we examine in this book and a notion that we attempt to unpack and challenge in this work. More specifically, messiness denotes urban conditions and processes that do not follow institutionalized or culturally prescribed notions of order. It suggests an alternative structure and hierarchy as well as agency and actions that are often subjugated by the dominant hierarchy, including notions of spatial and visual orders as well as social and political institutions and cultural norms. In this book, by examining a range of cases and contexts that span from Northeast Asia to South Asia, we are interested less in the distinct spatial and formal properties of specific locations and structures per se (although they can be quite remarkable and equally intriguing to study), but more on the social, spatial, and institutional politics of messiness, and the context

in which messiness has been constructed. In other words, we are interested in the questions that messiness raises with regard to the production of cities, cityscapes, and citizenship. *Messy Urbanism*, in this sense, is both a provocation of and resistance to the persistent, institutional, and cultural biases that continue to exist in the society in Asia (and beyond).

Rather than arguing for a distinct sort of "Asian-ness" or "Asian urbanism," the main intention of this book is to examine and make sense of the broader patterns of *informalized* urban orders and processes as well as their interplay with formalized institutions and mechanisms. In short, we are interested in the implications and potentiality of messiness in the continued production of Asian cities and its discourses.

In recent years, there have been a growing number of studies and publications on Asian cities (see Logan 2002; Boyarsky and Lang 2003; Douglass, Ho, and Ooi 2010; Bharne 2011; Perera and Tang 2013; Miller and Bunnell 2013). These volumes have each brought a specific focus to the diverse actors, locations, institutions, and processes of urbanization and urbanism in Asia. For us, the focus on messiness provides another lens and another window for examining a particular set of relationships between these actors, locations, institutions, and processes, and an aspect of urbanism that we believe still begs for greater understanding and investigation.

We are fully aware that the phenomenon of urban messiness is hardly unique to Asia. Besides the typical suspects in the Global South, growing awareness and discussion of similar examples in advanced industrialized countries have also emerged in recent literature.[2] Furthermore, any attempt to represent the vast and diverse contexts in the Asian continent is likely to fall short of addressing the actually existing, messy reality. Nevertheless, the diverse yet persistent patterns of messiness, along with the shared colonial experiences among many Asian nations and similar trajectories of industrialization and urban development, do provide a common ground for collective explorations and reflections. It is also necessary to note that, while we focus on the phenomenon of messiness in Asian cities, it is not our intention to sustain the dichotomy of East versus West when it comes to cultural contexts and urban forms, which we find to be an overly simplistic conceptualization. Instead, we argue that the messiness of Asian cities can serve as a point of departure for imagining alternative ways of understanding and shaping the city, Asian or non-Asian.

2. For example, the recent book *The Informal American City* (2014), edited by Vinit Mukhija and Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris, provides vivid examples of informal urbanism thriving in the United States in the form of community gardens, urban farms, appropriation of sidewalks, and transformation of front yards, garages, and parking lots. Another work is Kimberley Kinder's forthcoming book on the phenomenon of neighborhood self-provisioning in the case of Detroit.

Significance of Messiness

Messiness is not an unfamiliar subject in city planning and design. In fact, the emergence of city planning as a profession in North America and Europe has its very roots in efforts to address the mess of industrializing and rapidly growing cities in the nineteenth century, specifically the issues of congestion, sanitation, disease, fire, and social unrest (Hall 1988; Chudacoff, Smith, and Baldwin 2010). The influential planning discourses in the twentieth century, including the Garden City movement, City Beautiful movement, and the Modernism movement, shared a central concern with orderliness and an imperative to eradicate what were considered messiness and ills of the city. Through these movements and subsequent institutionalization, the dichotomy between order and messiness became ingrained and enshrined in planning and design ethos and practices. It was not until the turmoil of urban renewal in United States in the 1950s and 1960s that citizens and activists, along with some scholars and practitioners, including Jane Jacobs, Paul Davidoff, Roger Katan, and Ron Shiffman, began to challenge such an insular model of planning. The intellectual and political revolt against so-called rational planning paved the way for recognition of other forms of practices, including participatory planning and design that acknowledges the messiness of social and political processes in decision making.

In urban policy and planning in the developing world, the focus on another form of messiness—"urban informality"—emerged in research on housing in the work of Charles Abrams (1964) and John Turner (1966, 1972, 1976). There were also other early discussions on informality that focused primarily on issues of informal labor and economic conditions (Roy and AlSayyad 2004). It is important to note that even in the early works on the topic, urban informality is seen as integral to the formal institutions rather than being separate from them. As AlSayyad (2004, 14) points out, "Research in Latin America throughout the 1980s not only brought to light the crucial role of informal processes in shaping cities, but also situated informality within the larger politics of populist mobilizations and state power." In other words, informality was inseparable from formal political and institutional processes.

Urban informality has also been a subject of research in the Asian context, particularly through a number of anthropological studies that date back to the 1960s and 1970s.[3] In his research, McGee (1973) identifies hawkers in Hong Kong as occupying the "lower" circuit of the city's economy, vis-à-vis banking, export trade, modern industry, and services in the "upper" circuits and observes that both are part of the interlocking economic structure of the city. Specifically, "hawkers provide service to the public in that they seek out locations which are convenient to their customers, cutting down the time and cost of travel." They also function as an economic cushion at times of job scarcity. But, even when employment is abundant, "hawkers contribute

3. For examples, see Geertz (1963) and Dwyer (1970).

Figure 1.3
Hawker stands such as this one on Chun Yeung Street in Hong Kong are a result of negotiation and adaptation over time. Photograph by Jeffrey Hou.

Figure 1.4
Street vendors in Mumbai provide services to nearby office workers and urban dwellers with convenience and low price. Photograph by Jeffrey Hou.

to general productivity by utilizing labor which otherwise would not be employed, particularly that of housewives" (McGee 1973, 182). The case of Hong Kong is certainly not unique as many cities in Asia are also witness to such informal trade and commerce, including India where pedestrian hawkers and bicycle traders play an integral role in the country's vast informal economy.

Another important form of urban informality or messiness in Asian cities is the existence of premodern and informal neighborhoods that once provide essential services to the city. In Beijing, a significant proportion of the housing stock in the city's older neighborhoods was composed of informal construction that provided spaces for economic activities vital to the city's overall economy. Hundreds of thousands of workers in the city were economically dependent on the small-scale, informal service industries in such neighborhoods, and most of the businesses were located within short distances to the residences of their employees, fostering a "good work-living pattern throughout the old city" and helping form "a healthy and compact city structure" (Zhang 1997, 92). In Shenzhen, the so-called "villages in the city" have engaged in forms of self-provisioning by providing "affordable housing, close-knit social networks, and mixed-use developments," making up what formal planning has failed to supply (Du 2010, 66). Similarly, in Delhi the medieval walled city of Shahjahanabad also provides affordable housing and livelihood opportunities for hundreds of thousands of old-timers and migrant workers in a compact spatial and complex socioeconomic order.

According to a report released by Asian Development Bank in 2008, informal economies contributed an average of about 25 percent of gross national product in twenty-six Asian countries, and employed up to 60 percent of the urban population. At the same time, in demographic terms, slums or informal settlements are growing in these countries by "an average of 110 million people a year, reaching 692 million by 2015" (ADB 2008, iv). This trend holds worldwide. With rapid urbanization it is expected that more than one-third of the world's population will be living in squatter settlements by 2030 (Neuwirth 2006, xiii). Already in Delhi and Mumbai large populations of urban dwellers live in informal settlements, and an even greater number is employed in the informal economy. Cities in much of Asia, but especially in South Asia, have to confront a large informal sector that is growing more rapidly than the formal sector.

At such a significant scale, urban informality and messiness is often subject to conflicts, concerns, and contestation. In Beijing, unauthorized buildings are said to take up public spaces, cause traffic congestions, and accelerate environmental deterioration of neighborhoods (Zhang 1997). Most housing in the older neighborhoods in Beijing are characterized as overcrowded, unsanitary, and unsafe (Lü 1997). In Taipei, disputes happen frequently between market vendors and neighborhood residents over noise, trash, traffic, and crowding. In many Asian cities workers spend

countless hours in sweatshops risking their lives and safety to fire and collapse of underregulated and poorly maintained factory buildings. The bulk of the informal sector in Indian cities lacks access to even the most basic of urban infrastructure including clean water and indoor plumbing. While slum and slum dwellers are sometimes praised for their entrepreneurship and ingenuity in the face of adversity,[4] Roy (2004, 308) reminds us of the danger of aestheticizing poverty and the "seductive lure of Third World informality" that further exacerbates the inequalities that already exist in such cities by a misplaced focus on aesthetic improvement of the built environments of the poor.

While it is important to resist aestheticizing, the making of the informal city and urban messiness does offer lessons for urban planning, policy, and governance. There has been in fact a limited but growing recognition of the specific importance of informal planning. For example, Briassoulis (1997, 106) argues that "informal planning is simply another way of planning" and is "inseparable from formal planning." And although informal planning is not institutionalized, it has the potential to yield planned outcomes for specific interests (Briassoulis 1997). The growing recognition of informal planning sets the stage for the discourse of insurgent planning that claims such informal, everyday practices as counterhegemonic, transgressive, and imaginative (Miraftab 2009). Specifically, the discourse of insurgent planning recognizes the role and practices of subaltern groups in resisting control in the form of urban governance. The focus on informality and messiness here highlights the roles and contributions of diverse actors in the making of the urban environment, economy, and city life. The participation of diverse actors, including migrant workers and undocumented immigrants, in turn challenges the conventional notion of citizenship. The concept of insurgent citizenship (Holston 1998) questions the framework of urban governance that fails to recognize the role and contributions of diverse actors as active and engaged members of the society. It is in this vein that investigation of messiness opens the door to questions concerning the production of not only cities and cityscapes but also citizenship.

Threats to Messiness

Despite its physical, social, and economic significance, urban messiness is often dismissed by governing authorities and thus remains vulnerable to the large-scale spatial transformations in Asia. In major cities throughout China, for instance, thousands of inner-city residents living in dense, old neighborhoods have been relocated to make way for large-scale redevelopment projects. In Beijing, demolition and street widening has specifically targeted the so-called "peasant enclaves" that formed in the city

4. In a speech, Prince Charles of England praised Dharavi for its "underlying, intuitive 'grammar of design'" and "the timeless quality and resilience of vernacular settlements" (Tuhus-Dubrow 2009).

since the 1980s (Leaf 1995). From 1990 to 2002, 40 percent of the old city, covering some 6,178 acres, has been erased (Campanella 2008) with more than 400,000 households displaced by redevelopment projects between 1991 and 2004 (Abramson 2008). One particular settlement, Zhejiangcun, was razed in 1995, as the government considered it "an eyesore and potential source of political unrest only three miles from Tiananmen Square" (Campanella 2008, 127; described in detail in Zhang 2001). In Shanghai, between January 1996 and July 2005, a total of 672,893 households were evicted (Shanghai Ministry of Construction 2005, cited in Li and Song 2009).

In Mumbai, where approximately half of the city's population lives in informal settlements, officials have pushed forward to demolish squatter communities with the goal to "transform Mumbai into Shanghai, to chase away the chaos of the shantytowns and produce a city open for development" (Neuwirth 2006, xii, 7). The poor were pushed out from old city center to the outskirts, "ghettoized in peripheral slums leading to massive intra-city migration" (Banerjee-Guha 2002, 122). In Taipei, squatter communities have long been targets for urban redevelopment. In the 1990s, two major enclaves were demolished to make way for new parks to serve the growing middle class. More recently, one of the few remaining enclaves occupied by World War II veterans in the center of the city has been demolished to clear the way for a proposed redevelopment, modeled after the Roppongi Hill in Tokyo, in an ironic twist of the region's colonial narrative.

Along with the loss of traditional neighborhoods and informal settlements, an urban fabric that supports vitality and vibrancy in the city is also disappearing. In Shanghai and Beijing, dense *lilong* and *hutong* neighborhoods that support a pedestrian-friendly and street-centered urban environment have been replaced with ubiquitous superblock developments (Abramson 2008). In Shanghai, particularly because of such spatial transformations, the density and population of the central city has declined between 1990 and 2005, while the suburbs have expanded. More significantly, the depopulation has been accompanied by spatial segregation in form of gated communities for the affluent and the urban villages for the migrant workers, raising concerns about social cohesion and equity (Chiu 2008). The practice of exclusionary zoning in particular has banished "the kaleidoscopic array of uses that bring such vitality and life to the Chinese streetscape" (Campanella 2008, 81).

Even in matured (or stagnating) economies, older and seemingly less orderly urban fabrics have been subject to incentivized urban redevelopment. In Tokyo, relaxation of building codes to spur real estate development in the postbubble economy has allowed large, bulky apartment buildings to emerge in residential neighborhood with primarily one- to two-story low-rise homes (Sorensen 2003; Fujii, Okata, and Sorensen 2007; Machimura 2006). In Seoul and other South Korean cities, arterial streets have widened and merged with the fine fabric of narrow alleys or *golmok*, erasing the characteristic urban patterns of the cities "along with the communal

Figure 1.5
Large-scale urban redevelopments have already displaced large tracts of older neighborhoods in Shanghai and transformed the spatial and social fabric of the city. Photograph by Jeffrey Hou.

atmosphere they traditionally sustained" (Han 2013, 64). In Hong Kong's Wan Chai District, old tenement buildings flanked by street vendors have been replaced with high-rise apartment buildings and condos serving a new class of affluent residents. In Wanchai and elsewhere in Hong Kong, unlicensed street vendors have been increasingly purged by health inspectors and the police in recent years. The so-called "Fishball Revolution" in Mong Kok during the Lunar New Year in 2016 marked the tipping point of conflicts between supporters of street vendors and the police. The crash reflects deeper political tensions and distrust in Hong Kong.

As cities in Asia vie for global capital and commerce and seek recognition as "world-class" cities, they rely increasingly on strategies of large-scale spatial transformations, a process marked by displacement of poor residents and sanitization of the existing cityscapes for high-end uses (Douglass 2006). In Mumbai, under the dictates of neoliberal planning practices, the urban industrial neighborhoods of Girangaon originally comprising mill compounds and workers' housing known as *chawls* are being refashioned into a high-end neighborhoods using hypermodern and global aesthetics (Chalana 2010). In Beijing, migrant enclaves were expelled in advance of the 1990 Asian Games and again in 1992 and 1993 in preparation for the Olympic

bid (Broudehoux 2007). In Delhi several informal settlements were demolished in preparation for the Commonwealth Games in 2010, and the residents were evicted to resettlement projects in the outskirts of the city (Chalana and Rishi 2015).

In Taipei, renovations of old, historic markets have led to the proclaimed "deaths" of those markets. The most notable case was that of Yuanhuan, a popular food market formed on a roundabout during the colonial era under Japan. In 2002, after episodes of fire, the city government replaced the market with a new, modern structure featuring glass curtain walls and rooftop gardens. The new, multistory replacement structure turned out to be even more detrimental to the local businesses. The glass-encased dining space became unbearably hot during the summer months. The radial layout precluded vendors from talking and communicating with one another. Complicated circulation also deterred customers from visiting restaurants on the upper floors. Gradually, businesses left one after another, leaving behind an empty glass shell and a major embarrassment for the city administration that had made redevelopment of older neighborhoods a policy priority.

As old neighborhoods and urban fabric are being lost, many of the remaining ones have ironically become fashionable relics in the city. However, as these places become popular, they also attract investors and new businesses, as well as transformation and displacement. Xin Tian Di in Shanghai epitomizes the co-optation of an old *lilong* neighborhood into a commercial mall, setting a precedent for countless similar

Figure 1.6
The historic Qianmen district in Beijing now hosts global brand name stores and tourists. Photograph by Jeffrey Hou.

developments in China. These include the renovated Qianmen District in Beijing, a historically working-class neighborhood that once housed cheap eateries as well as a number of renowned shops selling traditional medicines and silk. Today, the area houses global fashion outlets, chain restaurants, and cafés. Older, less significant buildings were demolished, and in their place new buildings have emerged with façades resembling the older buildings. Similarly, in Mumbai some of old cotton mill buildings have been repurposed for high-end uses, as in the case of Phoenix Mill, now a luxury mall christened High Street Phoenix (Chalana 2012). Even at Chungking Mansions in Hong Kong, the recent improvement can be seen as a sign of sanitization to make the place more acceptable and attractive to the mainstream local customers and international tourists.

It is important to note that many of these spatial transformations are not new to Asian cities. For example, the transformation of Bangkok from an aquatic living environment to a terrestrial one has been in the making for more than a century since King Rama IV (r. 1851–68) and King Rama V (r. 1868–1910), inspired by their experience of the European cities (Noparatnaraporn and King 2007). In Taipei and other cities in Taiwan, the "street correction" program implemented by the Japanese colonial authority at the beginning of the twentieth century dramatically transformed the physical fabric and appearance of the cities. Traditional temple plazas were replaced with modern streetscapes. Western-style or Western-inspired building façades have contributed to the new identity of districts and neighborhoods. Changes like these and their adaptations and appropriations over time have created new vernacular environments and place identities, producing additional layers of messiness that defy simple categorization and singular interpretation.

Theorizing Messiness

Messiness and alternative interpretations of spatial and social processes have been the subjects of recent exploration in sciences and philosophy. Most notably, chaos theory addresses the behavior of dynamic systems in which small differences can amplify quickly, "rendering middle or long-term predictions impossible" (Gossin 2002, 73). In their work, Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 27) use the terms "rhizome" and "rhizomatic" to describe an alternative system of organization that "has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo." The related actor-network theory presents an alternative ontology that builds on nodes with as many dimensions as there are connections and whose strength "comes not from concentration, purity and unity, but from dissemination, heterogeneity and the careful plaiting of weak ties" (Latour 1996, 370). While philosophy and metaphysics are beyond the scope of this work, these poststructuralist concepts suggest possibilities for alternative readings, conceptualization, and construction of society and space.

Within the fields of planning and design, alternative understandings of spatial forms and processes have also been a subject of past and recent discourses. Jane Jacobs's spirited rebuttal and challenge to modernist planning in New York City in the 1950s and 1960s comes to mind. In *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), Jacobs's study of organized complexity at the street, district, and city scales resonates even more today. She considers modernist planning solutions insufficient in dealing with the complexity of the urban environments and argues against their wholesale replacement of existing neighborhoods. In the recent decades, scholarly work on the vernacular environment (Groth 1999) and everyday spatial practices (Chase, Crawford, and Kaliski 1999) contributes further to understanding the significance of such seemingly ordinary places for people who live and work there. These places and practices highlight the processes and performances in the city that often occur outside the formalized domain of planning and design. In *Loose Space*, Franck and Stevens (2006) examine how urban spaces are appropriated to unfold new meanings and possibilities beyond their intended and planned uses. Similarly, in *Insurgent Public Space*, Hou (2010) highlights the agency of individuals and communities in shaping and remaking the contemporary cityscapes.

Figure 1.7
The seemingly amorphous urban fabric of Tokyo disguises the underlying social and spatial structure of the city dating back to the feudal era. Photograph by Jeffrey Hou.

In the context of Asian cities, there have also been attempts to reveal and articulate their distinct systems and processes. For instance, Ashihara examines the amoeba-like, hidden order inherent in the character of Japanese cities and architecture. He argues that architecture and cities in Japan are "parts-oriented" rather than "whole-orientated" and that the predominant post-and-beam construction and climatic response, that is, ventilation, has resulted in permeable and fluid flow between inside and outside, which has created blurred boundaries in many Japanese cityscapes (Ashihara 1989). Similarly, in *Tokyo: A Spatial Anthropology*, Jinnai (1995) explores the deep structure of (Edo) Tokyo's seemingly amorphous cityscapes. The lack of apparent hierarchy in fact disguises a deeper order rooted in the city's feudal history and class-based geography. More recently, the collection of essays in *Urban Flashes Asia* (Boyarsky and Lang 2003) addresses directly the question of order versus disorder, focusing particularly on the ephemeral, "dirty," and self-organized aspects of Asian cities.

In recent years, a growing number of case studies have highlighted underlying aspects of specific Asian cities. For example, Solomon (2010) examines the micromalls of Hong Kong and argues that they serve as grounds of resistance against the global economy, specifically with their multitude of independently owned shops modeled on street markets and the network of service exchange among migrant workers, teenagers, and hobbyists. In *Made in Tokyo*, Kaijima, Kuroda, and Tsukamoto (2003) focus on the "shameless" buildings in Tokyo (or shall we say unpretentious?)—buildings and structures whose designs and construction are driven by the peculiar yet practical necessities and constraints in the Tokyo cityscape rather than normative aesthetics. In examining the "muddled, mixed-up, chaotic space" of Bangkok, King (2008, 328) argues that a Thai episteme seems intricately linked to the traditions of Thai Theravada Buddhism in which "ambivalence is central to the way in which reality is constructed" and in which "different orders can coexist." This is reflected in the heterogeneous cityscape of Sukhumvit with its "disregard for boundaries and regulation" (Noparatnaraporn and King 2007, 77).

In the studies of different Asian cities, the metaphor and framework of *layering* emerges as a common methodology in examining the composite nature of their multifaceted landscapes. Jinnai (1995) interprets (Edo) Tokyo's historic layers in terms of its waterways, bridges, and elevated expressways, on the one hand, and, on the other, the tiers of social classes as reflected in the divided surfaces and terrains of the city. King (2008) articulates four levels of "colonization" in Bangkok: *collaboration and concessions*, *ambiguous infiltration*, *proliferating Las Vegas*, and *the Orientalist gaze*. Each of these layers addresses a shifting relationship between inside and outside, the colonizers and the colonized. Leitner and Kang (1999) explore the political geography and identities of Taipei by examining the contested overlays of street names that represent Chinese nationalism vis-à-vis Taiwanese sovereignty and identity. Logan

(2002) suggests that revealing all layers of colonial, neocolonial, and cultural experiences enables one to tell stories about key stages in the evolution of societies and cities in Asia.

Lastly, in *Transcultural Cities: Border-Crossing and Placemaking* (Hou 2013), a collection of essays addresses a different kind of messiness in the making of the "global" Asian city through the transmigration of workers, refugees, and immigrants around the globe and within the region. The collection of case studies looks at how newcomers and old-timers negotiate identities and construct transcultural belongings and understanding through placemaking. The cases include the adaptation of sacred and secular spaces by South Asian immigrants in Chicago, Brazilian restaurants in Tokyo, Chinese lion dance and temporary expressions of cultural identity in Yangon, Korean diaspora in Philippines cities, transcultural production of Little Shanghai in the suburb of Sydney, conflicts between locals and trans-Asian migrants in the New Chinese villages in Malaysia, the naming of Cambodia Town in Long Beach, California, and the precarious survival of Little Indonesia in Taipei. Together, the multiple voices and diverse subject matters speak to the complexity of the ongoing transformations in the cityscapes of local and global Asia(s).

A Book of Messiness

The chapters herein each bring a distinct perspective and geographical focus to the understanding of messiness in Asian cities. Collectively, our goal is to illuminate, untangle, and give meanings to the conditions of messiness in Asian cities, to highlight some of the key characteristics, and to articulate their implications for policy, governance, and spatial practices.

We begin with chapters on Ho Chi Minh City and Jakarta by Annette Kim and Abidin Kusno that respectively interrogate the concept of messiness (and order) in the two cities by examining contested views and uses of city streets in the context of broader and deeper historical narratives and colonial processes. Specifically, they examine how messiness and order are often perceived and defined through social lenses and racial biases. Next, in chapters on Metro Manila and Bangkok, José Edgardo A. Gomez Jr. and Koompong Noobanjong each offer a structural view of the urban order and disorder. Whereas Gomez examines the layering of Metro Manila in terms of its understory, midlevel, and the canopy—echoing the structure of the native Austronesian cosmology, Noobanjong examines the surfaces of Sanam Luang (the Royal Ground) in Bangkok as a palimpsest in which different actors and histories reside in the memories and meanings of the place. With a similar lens, Ken Tadashi Oshima examines the district of Shinjuku in Tokyo that is simultaneously modern and old, orderly and disorderly.

In a pair of chapters on Hong Kong, Kin Wai Michael Siu, Mingjie Zhu, and Daisy Tam evoke concepts of tactics and the everyday in examining the spatial practices performed by vendors and migrant workers. In addition, whereas Siu and Zhu propose a framework of "neutral equilibrium" to articulate an alternative spatial order and dynamic, Tam applies the notion of parasitism to explore the porosity between the formal and the informal. In two chapters on Indian cities, Manish Chalana and Susmita Rishi and Vikramāditya Prakāsh, engage the two ends of the urban spectrum in India—the "unplanned" slums of Delhi and the "planned" city of Chandigarh. In particular, Prakāsh examines the asymmetries and messiness of transnational work in the making of a new modern state capital and the tensions between "universal expertise," transnational actors, and the local state agenda. Chalana and Rishi examine the multiple layers of ordering in an informal settlement in Delhi to demonstrate how these self- and incrementally built places continue to serve their residents as both work and living spaces. They argue that the proposed resettlement project for this neighborhood aiming to restore spatial order would in fact create disorder for the residents.

Finally, Jeffrey Hou and Daniel Abramson examine different modes of engagement by citizens and community groups in the making of cityscapes in various cities in East Asia. Specifically, Abramson makes a case for small-scale, incremental, and participatory processes to counter the predominant tendency for standardized planning in China. Through a series of snapshots that highlight instances of bottom-up placemaking, Hou argues that the everyday practices of citizens, and particularly marginalized groups themselves, already constitute a form of planning and engagement with the city. The recognition of such actions and processes would be the first step toward a more inclusive practice of city making.

By examining the conditions and conceptualization of messiness in Asian cities through a series of case studies, our intention in this book is to investigate and reveal the rich arrays of contexts, forces, and practices of urbanism in Asia. Rather than presenting a normative understanding of messiness and a template for "best practices" for planning in the face of messiness, however, our goal is to first unpack the complexity, heterogeneity, and contradictions to the extent that we can, without being reductionist in our approach. Indeed, the ongoing and evolving messiness of Asian cities is not something one can easily generalize or conclude upon. Doing so is likely to defeat the purpose of engaging with their complexity, contradictions, challenges, and opportunities. *Messy Urbanism* is therefore not a new -ism, but a provocation and a call for a deeper investigation of the actually existing urbanism in Asia and more broadly the Global South. It is a call to question and challenge the predominant, hegemonic urban orders as manifested and embodied in the normative planning and design of urban spaces and the operations of dominant social and political institutions. By focusing on the actual, alternative production of urban spaces, it is also our

goal to recognize and highlight the multitude of actors and actions that create actually existing cities, actors whose agency and ingenuity are what shapes the present and the future of cities and communities in Asia and beyond.

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