Event Horizon PC: (CC)
Anthony Gormley, 2016.

Hong Kong's Socioeconomic Divide on the Rise

Lessons from the
'Redevelopment' of the
Graham Street Market

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In 2007, Hong Kong's Urban Renewal Authority declared the 150-year-old Graham Street Market 'a slum' and announced 'redevelopment' plans that would replace it with four luxury high-rise office buildings and hotels. This essay analyses the market's historical function and the actions of concerned civil society organisations vis-a-vis government authorities and urban developers in the battle to 'save the market'. It argues that the Graham Street Market is both a laboratory for normative urban governmentality and a testing ground for grassroots practices of collective identity and sustainability.

While we are heading towards the 2022 Hong Kong Chief Executive 'election', scheduled for 27 March, it is worth remembering that on 26 March 2017, when former chief secretary and pro-Beijing candidate Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor was 'elected' as the new Chief Executive, she pledged to heal the city's social divide, declaring: 'Hong Kong, our home, is suffering from quite a serious divisiveness and has accumulated a lot of frustration. My priority will be to heal the divide and to ease the frustration—and to unite our society to move forward' (Ng 2017). Significantly, she added: 'I too want

more democracy in Hong Kong. But Hong Kong is facing a lot of problems. Why don't we start with the easier subjects first?' (Ng 2017).

Contrary to the Chief Executive's disingenuous statement, the socioeconomic divide is not an 'easy subject'; rather, it is the most striking characteristic of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region's model of normative urbanism, which is the focus of this essay. Using textual analysis, interviews, and participatory action research, this essay aims to contribute to the scholarship on the sociospatial politics of land redevelopment and displacement in Hong Kong, arguing that what I define as the normative urbanist logic of disciplining and sanitising public space has drastically accelerated since the transfer of sovereignty to the People's Republic of China (PRC) on 1 July 1997. This essay offers both a critique of the dominant ideology of economic prosperity—what Wing-Shing Tang (2017) poignantly defines as 'hegemony-cum-alienated redevelopment'—and an analysis of the forms of resistance to the urban planning interventions that have determined the transformation of the physical and socioeconomic structures of dwelling and retailing, changing forever the practices of everyday life. The selected focus is the progressive annihilation of fresh food markets, which were traditionally at the centre of Hong Kong citizens' way of life and which now have mostly been replaced with ultra-modern, luxury, high-rise buildings.

Street markets offer a unique lens through which to investigate the political discourse of urban areas as a field of inquiry and analyse the negotiation processes between the vertical strategies of land redevelopment deployed by the dominant powers and the horizontal tactics of urban resistance deployed by citizens (Lefebvre 2003). These places are barometers of equity and economic development, collective sociality, and sustainability, living heritage, socioecological prosperity, and community cohesion (Shepherd 2009; Stillerman 2006; Watson and Wells 2005; Marinelli 2018). In Hong Kong, they have become sites of conflict and compromise, vibrant expressions of collective identity, embodied resistance, and the production of social capital. Analysing the transformation of street markets offers significant

insights into the ramifications of the socioeconomic and spatial divides, allowing us to challenge Hong Kong's facade of economic prosperity and to test alternative pathways towards socioecologically sustainable prosperity. In this vein, this essay takes a 'history from below' approach to rescue the extraordinary stories of ordinary people and their everyday experiences from the 'enormous condescension of posterity' (Thompson 1966). It also advocates a 'sustainability from below' approach as opposed to sustainable livelihood discourses (Morse and McNamara 2013; Lau 2010).

The Graham Street Market: The Context

Hong Kong's uneven cityscape is emblematic of the hegemonic logic of the 'city for profit' versus the 'city for people' (Brenner et al. 2009). The dominant ideology of economic prosperity is dictated by the sociospatial politics of land redevelopment and displacement (Tang et al. 2011). At the macroeconomic level, the uneven distribution of wealth serves as evidence of this: Hong Kong's Gini coefficient in 2021 has widened to 0.539—not only the highest rating recorded in four decades in the city, but also the highest rating of any developed economy (Chiu 2004; Forrest et al. 2004; World Population Review 2021). In recent years, income disparity has widened, and quality of life has declined for the city's 7.3 million residents, with the top 1 per cent becoming richer, while 1.3 million residents (20 per cent of the population) live below the poverty line.

At the microlevel, the evidence is provided by the numerous 'urban renewal projects'. Here, I will concentrate on the 150-year-old Graham Street Market (嘉咸街市集, Gayanggai in Cantonese)—Hong Kong's oldest market, and a remarkable example of living heritage. The Urban Renewal Authority (URA), a Hong Kong Government statutory body formed in 2001 to promote and undertake urban redevelopment, uses the term 'project' to refer to the market's transformation from 2007, arguing: 'The living and built environment will be improved to facilitate a regeneration

of the vibrancy of the neighbourhood as well as preserving the identity of the place' (URA n.d.). However, as we will see, the upgrading of the neighbourhood was not necessarily meant for the former residents or the market's stall vendors and shop operators, since most of these were expected to accept compensation and leave during the 'redevelopment', which is what happened.

Map showing the location of Graham Street Market.

Historically, street hawking was the first step up Hong Kong's economic ladder, especially for newcomers from mainland China. This led to a huge increase in the number of hawkers, from around 13,000 in the 1920s to more than 70,000 in the 1950s and 1960s (Smart 1989: 52). In the 1970s, the British colonial government decided to take an active role in disciplining public space: first, it stopped issuing hawkers' licences, in 1973, and then, throughout the 1980s, it progressively turned street markets into public markets in the name of 'progress' and for the sake of 'public health'. The outcome was the development of 'modern', 'civilised', and 'hygienic' urban spaces, despite the collateral damage of annihilating living heritage. Here, I define living heritage as the complex of informal activities, embodied social relationships, and cultural practices that create collective forms of everyday life and coexistence in a specific locale. In this view, the street market is a perfect example of living heritage; maintaining its vibrancy and keeping it alive are the *sine qua non* to continue to bring disparate social, ethnic, and generational groups together, engendering a sense of community among residents. The significance of the Graham

Street Market lies in its living past and community value, which for a long time coalesced into a remarkable resilience in the face of change and challenging circumstances.

In his 2001 study of Hong Kong, Hikaru Kinoshita asked: 'When does a street market come to an end?' He identified five stages in the development of the city. First, hawkers appeared on a popular street; second, they gradually formed two rows on both sides of the street; third, between the 1930s and 1970s, many street hawkers selling raw meat and fish moved into low-rise market buildings, while in the fourth stage temporary market buildings were erected to contain the hawkers. In the fifth and final stage, since the 1980s, 'entire retail markets have been moved into high-rise buildings, leaving very few hawkers outside' (Kinoshita 2001: 82). However, Graham Street Market did not change from stages two–three to four–five until the URA's 2007 'renewal project'. But let us start with the origins of the market.

Undated historical photograph of Graham Street Market. PC: Heritage Discovery Centre Library of the Antiquity and Monuments Office, Hong Kong.

PC: The image is taken from URA (2008).

Tentative 1841–2015 timeline of the development of Graham Street Market.

1841 Graham Street Market opens, known as the “Chinese Market”.

1950s The market thrives as refugees from China become street traders.

1975 Queen Elizabeth II graces the market with a visit.

1990s Central-Mid-levels escalators open; vendors also start to sell western vegetables.

2003 Central Market closes. Business is driven to Graham Street Market.

2007 URA announces the redevelopment; later agrees to build ‘new wet market’.

2009 Demolition of Site B.

2012 Cheung Kong (Holdings) Limited wins Site B contract.

2013 Vendors ordered to leave, date TBC. New wet market incomplete.

2014–2015 The end?

The Origins, Development, and Challenges of Graham Street Market

In Hong Kong’s Central District, Peel Street runs parallel to Graham Street. The two streets were built in the 1840s, at the beginning of the colonial era. Street hawkers have operated in this area since 1841 when the market became known as the ‘Middle Bazaar’. In the racially segregated colonial society, Chinese people were only allowed to live in the western part of what was then called Victoria City, centred on present-day Central and extending from today’s Kennedy Town, Shek Tong Tsui, and Sai Ying Pun to present-day Wan Chai (Carroll 2007: 74–75). Therefore, as Mee Kam Ng (2014: 83) noted: ‘The then “China Town” west of the CBD was filled with street markets’ and ‘[t]he Graham and Peel Street area became one of the first settlement sites for the Chinese community, and it was also the trading centre for Parsee and Indian merchants’. Significantly, however, the first hawkers’ licences were formally issued in 1946

and the last one in 1980, even though from 1973 the government had generally ceased to issue new licences.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, street hawkers continued to operate in the area alongside indoor retail vendors and more formal stores, which were on the ground floors of two four-storey tenement buildings called *tong lau* (唐樓), on Graham and Peel streets. Built from the late nineteenth century until 1964, the *tong lau* were designed for both residential (on the upper floors) and commercial (ground floor) uses and represented the livelihood of the market’s food vendors.

After the handover, in February 1999, the Land Development Corporation (LDC)—the Government statutory body created in 1988 to oversee urban ‘renewal’—approved the Development Scheme Plan to regenerate the area, comprehensively redeveloping the three street blocks where the Graham–Peel Street Market was operating, with the declared aim of ‘eliminating environmental nuisance such as on-street hawkers’ (LDC 1998, para. 3; cf. LDC 1999). As Ng (2014: 80) observes: ‘Similar to many other redevelopment

projects undertaken by the LDC, the objective was to produce more spaces for exchange value.' In 2001, the LDC was replaced with the URA. Both the LDC and the URA have been criticised as 'land robbers' which 'slash and burn' old neighbourhoods (Ng 2014). The momentum for redevelopment and the removal of local shops and affordable housing to make way for upmarket buildings have led to growing community-based resistance movements, especially among the younger generation frustrated with the accelerated social polarisation in the city (Ng 2014).

In 2007, Graham Street Market covered 5,317 square metres, with 360 property interests in 37 buildings with 470 households (1,120 people), 78 shops, and 130 licensed fixed-pitch hawkers and other itinerant peddlers, for a total of 823 traders. According to the URA survey, four blocks were built before World War II, while most of the remainder were built between the mid-1950s and the early 1960s (URA 2007). In the jargon of the URA, this was merely 'a project'. The crucial question is whether this 'project' related to a 'vital living heritage' community or 'a slum' to be eliminated as collateral damage of normative urbanism.

Graham Street Market map: 'Our Vital Living Past', 2008. PC: Maurizio Marinelli.

In 2007, the URA explicitly declared the historical market ‘a slum’ and announced its 10-year project (2007–17, even though the target completion is now 2024) to regenerate the area ‘bounded by Peel Street, Graham Street, Gage Street, Wellington Street, Cochrane Street, Gutzlaff Street, Staveley Street and Kin Sau Lane in the Central and Western district’ (URA n.d.). Allegedly, the area was sanitised and ‘modernised’, but it was ultimately normalised under the supervision of the URA, in accordance with its mission ‘to promote and undertake urban redevelopment in Hong Kong’ (Marinelli 2016a).

In January 2008, three local organisations, the SEE Network, the Central and Western Community Concern Group (中西區關注組, CWCCG), and the Conservancy Association Centre for Heritage (CACH), published and distributed a 12-page fold-out pamphlet with the English title ‘Graham Street Market: Our Vital Living Past’ (see Pic. 5). Behind the playful appearance of the cartoon map,

this document read as a powerful civic and political statement. The pamphlet’s authors argued that the URA-led ‘project’ was purely profit-driven and would have turned the whole area into a dusty building site, inexorably annihilating the preexisting market. In fact, in July 2007, the URA had announced plans ‘to demolish the old tenement buildings [*tong lau*] on Graham and Peel Streets’ (URA n.d.), without mentioning that the market would be torn down in the process. According to the URA-led ‘project’, ‘only’ 38 of the 78 shops would have been affected, but ultimately all 823 traders would have been impacted. The redevelopment would have transformed the ground-floor area of 20,219 square metres (on a site area of 5,330 square metres) into 68,533 square metres, including 44,575 square metres for commercial use and 293 new flats, allegedly leaving 2,060 square metres for ‘a strong open space spine accentuated with piazzas and courtyard spaces’ (URA n.d.).²

Site plan for Graham Street Market. PC: URA (2008).

Artist's impression of the wet market shops (viewed from Graham Street). PC: URA (2008).

The final aim of redesigning this urban space was to build a giant luxury complex, with four sleek and glittering high-rises, including: two residential blocks comprising 293 luxury flats (Sites A and B in Pic. 6), one 26-storey hotel with 8,918 square metres of floor space, one 32-storey office building with 37,161 square metres of space for sale, and an underground car park (Site C in Pic. 6). All this 'luxury' was to emerge from the ashes of the historical market's stalls. In the URA's three-dimensional architectural rendering, there was also an 'Old Market Street' (Pics 7 and 8), but the adjective 'old' was merely an evocative charm on a new, artificial tourist attraction—the uncanny triumph of the fake, after the destruction of the real old market.

In 2007, the overall cost of the renewal operation that would have stopped the heartbeat of one of Hong Kong's oldest neighbourhoods was estimated at a controversial HK\$487 million (roughly equivalent to US\$3.8 billion) (URA 2007), which was

justified in the name of progress, modernity, and ultimately, the normative-prescriptive character of urban governmentality.

The Graham Street Market 'Project' and the Challenges for Social Prosper

Over the years, the redevelopment of the Graham Street Market became one of the URA's most controversial projects. The distinctive location added to the complications. The government was fully aware of the strategic importance of the Central District for Hong Kong; the market occupies an extremely congested part of Central, which had to be made more accessible, in terms of both onsite and global connectivity.

Artist's impression of the wet market shops
(viewed from Graham Street). PC: URA (2008).

In January 2008, Hong Kong Central-born Katty Law, co-founder of the CWCCG, together with Australian architect and art critic John Batten, questioned the truthfulness of the URA's claims regarding the Graham Street redevelopment project (Law 2008). Law's argument was that the URA's statements were deliberately 'misleading' as they did not intend to take into consideration the needs and desires of community members and hawkers. Furthermore, she emphasised that the URA project was ignoring important factors of the redevelopment that would have negatively affected the hawkers, such as the loss of business, the erasure of at least 30 food stalls, the demolition of 37 buildings, and numerous safety hazards. Law also complained that the URA had not been straightforward or transparent.

Community members have repeatedly urged the URA to present an honest and complete picture of its redevelopment plan as the three-dimensional

model presented to the public in 2008 showed only three levels of shopping mall along the so-called Old Market Street, and did not show the four high-rise towers. When asked to present the model produced for the Town Planning Board, the URA said it had been damaged and sent to Shenzhen for repair. Apparently, it never came back. Therefore, Law raised the legitimate question: 'Why is URA so afraid to show us the true picture?' (Law 2008; Marinelli 2016b).

On 28 July 2008, during a media briefing to announce detailed measures for the 'Make-over of Graham Street Market', former URA chairman Barry Cheung emphasised the adoption of 'tactical measures' to keep 'the nearby century-old market intact as well as to enhance its vibrancy' (URA 2008). This was evidence of the URA's appropriation of the language of the community-concern groups. Cheung's speech was an attempt to distinguish between what he called

The progressive disappearance of Graham Street Market. PC: Maurizio Marinelli.

‘the construction project’ and ‘the market-area’ (URA 2008). Cheung claimed ‘the project’ would only affect a specific area, while the market would be external to ‘the project’: ‘Strictly speaking, the market is outside the boundary of the Peel Street/Graham Street project. Nevertheless, the URA considers it as a *golden opportunity to improve the living environment* of residents in *dilapidated buildings* as well as to help *save the market* from further shrinking’ (URA 2008; emphasis added). The paradox is evident: anyone who is familiar with the market’s extension and the street hawkers’ embeddedness within the perimeter of the ‘project’ would find the claim that the market is outside the area to be redeveloped disingenuous. But Cheung insisted that ‘tactic measures’ would be ‘targeted to ensure that *business is as usual* in the market during the construction of *the project*, and to prevent it from further shrinking as a result of *natural gentrification* already taking place there’ (URA 2008; emphasis added).

The URA’s justification derives, allegedly, from its mapping of ‘a *comprehensive plan* to address the needs and requirements of shops and stalls operating in the market’, with a promise that, based on its ability to hear ‘*the voices of the community to retain the market*’ when the ‘project’ was announced in 2007, ‘[c]onstruction work will be

carried out *in stages* to *minimize inconvenience* to market stall operators and users’ (URA 2008; emphasis added). The photographs I have taken over a 10-year period (2008–18), however, prove otherwise (see photos above).

On 7 August 2008, the URA convened a focus group meeting in Central. A URA spokesman declared:

We have been soliciting community views on the planning of the Peel Street/Graham Street project since 2005. While the Master Layout Plan of the project was approved by the Town Planning Board in May 2007, the URA attaches a great deal of importance on maintaining the local features and characters within and in the vicinity of the Peel Street/Graham Street project. (URA 2008)

One of the outcomes of the focus group meeting was the creation of a Conservatory Advisory Panel, which included representatives of the street hawkers and residents in addition to district council members, with the aim of ‘looking into matters related to preservation elements around our project area’ (URA 2008). Unfortunately, these statements have proved to be purely cosmetic, and no substantial changes have been made.

Aggravated Precarity and Increasing Social Division

The lack of communication and consultation with the public has progressively heightened the vendors' sense of vulnerability and precarity, increasing fears about 'what will really happen at the end of the redevelopment' (Law 2008). The crucial issue for the Graham Street Market is the relationship between public space and private interests in the redevelopment of Central Hong Kong. The normative urbanist discourse of 'what ought to be' according to the master plan is dominated by the logic of increasing the area's exchange value while dismissing the community's concerns for the use-value of the marketplace. This logic is strictly interrelated with what Harvey calls the 'accumulation' of public resources 'by dispossession' (Harvey 2004: 64). The consequence is the aggravation of conditions of precarity, which Butler (2009: 25–26) defines as 'a politically induced condition of maximized precariousness'. Butler further argues that '[a]ggression forms the incessant matter for ethical struggles' and, building on Emmanuel Levinas, acknowledges the possibility of seeing 'how dominant forms of representation can and must be disrupted for something about the precariousness of life to be apprehended' (Butler 2004: xviii).

In this sense, I argue that the unmasking of the dominant narrative upheld by the URA in 2007–08 created a space for articulating critical views of government policy and saw the emergence of a collective civic culture. In 2007, activist Chu Hoi-dick—who strenuously fought to save the Star Ferry and Queen's piers from destruction in late 2006 and early 2007—criticised the government's top-down policymaking. He argued that Hong Kong's heritage activism had brought to the fore the lack of democratic practices: 'I do not deny this is just the beginning of a new political movement. It is a movement to re-establish the identity of Hong Kong people, not controlled by the British and not controlled by Beijing' (cited in Pomfret 2007). One could even argue that the battle to save the living heritage of Hong Kong's street markets was a precursor of the 2014 'Umbrella Movement'. This

is what emerges from the numerous interviews and participatory action research I have conducted over the years with street vendors, community concern groups, and government officials.

Significant also are the remarks by Designing Hong Kong CEO and local politician Paul Zimmerman and Australian architect John Batten, who emphasised how less than two years after the first focus group meeting, in the spring of 2010, the real estate trust was sold to Link Asset Management, which was created and floated on the stock market in 2008. Batten added that 'this is certainly not an enterprise committed to social corporate responsibility ... It is a sort of buffer for the Government, so that it does not have to get directly involved' (Marinelli 2012). Link also took over the carparks and retail and commercial spaces included in the housing estates built by the Housing Authority, with the declared aim of 'upgrading them'. However, the real final aim of upgrading was to 'generate higher revenue, since once the upgrading has been completed, the rent goes up' (Marinelli 2012). According to Batten, this is what is happening with the Graham Street Market: 'The government wants to maximise floor-space and money so they like luxury tower-blocks' (Marinelli 2012)—in other words, increasing the exchange value rather than the use-value. Batten pointed to a series of *tong lau* buildings, all of which would have to come down to make way for the 26-storey luxury hotel. Batten and Law's activism is motivated by the desire to prevent the total annihilation of this living heritage: 'The issue with the URA is that they want to take over the public space. They will have the monopoly of the tenure of the place: there will be just one single landlord (the URA), not many. Thus, the URA will control this [formerly public] space' (Marinelli 2012).

For Batten, as an architect, and Paul Zimmerman, an environmentalist, politician, and businessman: 'It is essential to develop a holistic approach to good urban planning: this should guarantee pedestrian flows, the existence of public space, and appropriate buildings that allow airflow and sunlight' (Marinelli 2012). In this sense, the battle to save Graham Street Market has turned this historical, vibrant space into a testing ground for

the preservation of forms of healthy, sustainable living, community identity value formation, and bottom-up practices of democratisation.

Phased Redevelopment as a Tactic of Normative Urbanism

After multiple complaints and demonstrations organised by the CWCCG, in 2010–11, the URA promised a ‘phased redevelopment’ (URA 2011). It announced it would focus on one area first, clearing ‘Site B’, while building a two-storey ‘New Market’ complex to rehouse the affected shop owners. The URA declared it wanted ‘to create synergy with the current street market’ and only later would it have started working on the other two sites, A and C (URA 2011).

In 2011, the URA also promised to adopt ‘a caring and sustainable approach’ aimed at ‘improving the physical living–working environment whilst offering opportunities to retain the historical-cultural characteristics as well as the social network of the district’ (URA 2011). Therefore, it argued:

Apart from the design and planning of the overall development, interim measures such as phased redevelopment for temporal re-site [sic] of the current market stakeholders at Site B to Site A and C, provisioning of electric meter for hawkers and market vibrancy promotion were also carried out to enhance the vibrancy of street markets. (URA 2011)

The URA had skilfully appropriated both the language and the civic-political discourse of its critics to weaken their strength and invalidate their arguments. However, at the time, the acknowledgement of the necessity to proceed through a ‘phased redevelopment’, accompanied by the URA’s promises, appeared to be a limited, although temporary, ‘success’, especially compared with the original project to annihilate the whole market. The URA’s pledges were accompanied by a government-led promotional campaign called ‘Hong Kong

Our Home’, which featured many of the market’s vendors. Immediately after that, it became clear that the promised ‘New Market’ would allow fewer than half of the vendors to be relocated, as there were only 10 spaces in the new complex—all reserved for vendors of wet goods, such as vegetables, fruit, fish, and meat. Serious questions were also raised about the rates to be paid for the new stalls after the end of the three-year period of rent control promised by the URA (Chan 2013).

I conducted fieldwork between 2008 and 2018. I noticed that, by 2013–14, the transformation of the site was already advanced: the redevelopment had already affected 37 buildings, forcing out dozens of stall vendors whose family had been there for generations, while the remaining traders lost 30–50 per cent of their business. Furthermore, the demographics of the customers and residents in the area were progressively changing, and the whole market was disquietingly dominated by a huge cloud of dust. The construction of Site B was in progress, with an estimated completion date of 2017, while the targeted completion date for Sites A and B was 2021. However, in October 2021, the URA’s website was reporting the following: ‘Site B completed in 2019, Site A is expected to be completed in 2023, Site C is expected to be completed in 2024’ (URA n.d.).

According to my observations and onsite interviews, while construction of the three sites has not been completed, the vibrancy of the historical market has indeed faded. During a 2016 meeting with URA Director Michael Ma, I asked him whether the ‘project’ risked the destruction of Hong Kong’s living heritage. He first stated that ‘[h]eritage and its urban landscape is a manifestation of the cultural values of a community’, but then added that ‘while Hong Kong’s colonial history was very short ... the pre-colonial time expanded over thousands of years’, thus claiming that the preexisting, millenarian Chinese heritage of Hong Kong was erased by British colonial rule (Marinelli 2016a). One must acknowledge, however, that the temporalities of the sociospatial redevelopment seem to indicate an acceleration of the destruction of living heritage after the 1997 transfer of Hong Kong’s sovereignty to the PRC.

In the case of Graham Street Market, it was the LDC that put forward the Development Scheme Plan to redevelop the area, allegedly in the name of ‘environmental improvement ... by eliminating environmental nuisance such as on-street hawkers’ (LDC 1998). The plan was approved by the Town Planning Board in February 1999 but not implemented (LDC 1999). After the LDC passed the baton to the URA in 2001, the URA submitted a revised Redevelopment Master Plan, which contained the ‘project’ with four high-rises, and the Town Planning Board approved it in May 2007 (URA n.d., 2011). Unfortunately, the unstoppable transformation has led to the demise of this historical market; this proves that the normative urbanist logic of disciplining and sanitising public space has drastically accelerated and ultimately won in Hong Kong, creating increasing levels of precarity, uncertainty, and vulnerability, and widening the social divide.

Lessons of the Present and Past, and Hopes for the Future?

Intense debates about what is the urban (Brenner and Schmid 2015; Scott and Storper 2015; Peck 2015) call for concrete investigations through a bottom-up approach to understand where our daily experiences of the urban are embodied. This is the crux of the urbanist discourse. For urban planners and architects, the focus should be on built forms and structure, while historians and geographers call for more attention to patterns of urban growth and transformative processes. This essay advocates an epistemological shift to bring into the urbanist discourse a sensitivity to residents’ social interactions, their sense of belonging, and the construction of communities within cities.

I concur with Merrifield that the main political theme in the unfolding of contemporary urbanism should be a shift ‘from the right to the city to the politics of the encounter’ (Merrifield 2013: xvii). Street markets are the entry point to understand how and to what degree an eco-socially sustain-

able urban life is produced and experienced—paraphrasing Lefebvre (2003): the social ontology of the everyday.

Street markets enable daily encounters among urban residents and between people and things; they are critical spaces to support urban residents’ livelihoods. Street markets allow us to delve into the conflicting trajectories and comparative dynamics of gentrified neighbourhoods, since the global neoliberal restructuring of urban space brings to the fore fundamental questions about rights and practices to preserve communities and their living heritage. Therefore, this essay’s focus responds to the appeal of gentrification studies for a critical scholarly commitment to ‘viewing the most serious consequence of gentrification—displacement—“from below” (e.g. those who experience it)’ (Slater 2012: 572; see also Slater et al. 2004; Lees et al. 2016). The study of street markets allows us to delve into the micropolitical dynamics of the urban, shedding light on the material processes of the everyday, which are critical for further investigating the ontological nexus of variegated practices and relations that are shaping the urban. This focus allows us to explore issues related to sustainable social prosperity and community cohesion, adopting a ‘history from below’ and ‘sustainability from below’ perspective, to better understand the increasing sociopolitically induced condition of precarity (Butler 2009).

Street markets help us to better understand the nexus between politics and policy from the bottom up. In colonial and global Hong Kong, street markets are sites where both the normative urbanist logic and the possible counterdiscourses have reached their climax: ‘what ought to be’ has suppressed any possibility of what could have been preserved and valued.

The street markets’ progressive annihilation, accompanied by drastic changes in the practices of everyday life, shows how citizens’ tactics for coping with the policy–politics nexus succumb to normative urbanism. Private and public capital exert relentless forms of power in regulating and rewriting the urban fabric. At the horizontal level, precariousness and precarity are coalescing, denaturalising Hong Kong citizens’ sense of collective

identity, and challenging possible pathways to heterotopic forms of eco-socially sustainable prosperity. Graham Street Market is the epitome of the normative urbanist logic of modernising, sanitising, and disciplining both public space and those who inhabit it. The state cannot accept what it considers to be outside the norm, while urban informality involves ‘complex adaptive assemblages’ (Dovey 2012: 372).

Graham Street Market’s vendors and customers were ‘outside the norm’ as differentiated users of public space, and not generic urban subjects. Historical processes and social patterns of inhabiting this locale had created a sense of belonging and a collective identity that was not in line with the universalising character that normative urbanism presupposes and implies. The state, and its executive arm embodied by statutory bodies, encompassed an urban strategy mechanistically based on ‘what ought to be’ rather than ‘what could be’; the implementation of the Graham Street Market ‘project’ aimed to increase the area’s exchange value, ignoring the use-value of public space. In the process of creating ‘what ought to be’, Graham Street Market was not a ‘site of vibrant social encounters’ (Watson 2009: 1580), but merely collateral damage.

Perhaps there is a dim ray of hope. As I write these lines in October 2021, URA Director Wai Chi-sing has recently declared the authority will launch a pilot scheme, sending questionnaires to 250 apartment-owners in an old building on Sai Wan Ho Street in Shau Kei Wan, asking them whether they want their flats to be redeveloped or just renovated. One is left to wonder whether this questionnaire indicates the beginning of a new (holistic?) strategy, ‘a new bottom-up approach to urban regeneration ... a fine-tuned version of previous demand-led models’ (Ng and Low 2021) or is merely wishful thinking. Judging from the redevelopment ‘project’ for this street, which was awarded by the URA to Kingland Century Limited in September 2015 (URA 2015), might the questionnaires simply be another appropriation of community-concern groups’ language and heritage preservation discourse? Or might this be just a tactical, propagandistic electoral measure for Chief Executive Carrie Lam, who on 6 October

2021 delivered her annual address to the Legislative Council, thanking ‘the earnest words of the central government, that it will always provide staunch support to Hong Kong’ (Siu and Jim 2021). On that occasion, she also announced (again) that she intends to address Hong Kong’s social divide, put an end to the longstanding housing shortage, and eliminate the tens of thousands of subdivided units and ‘cage homes’ (Ng and Low 2021) through the creation of vast metropolises away from the city centre, such as the Northern Metropolis and Lantau Tomorrow (Lhatoo 2021). Only time will tell, but the ‘history from below’ of the Graham Street Market is more an ominous rather than a promising sign for community living and sustainable social prosperity. ■

1 In 2016–17, only 3 per cent of the population (233,000 people) was allowed to select the 1,500 Election Committee seats—now reduced to 0.06 per cent (4,800 people) under the new ‘patriots-only system’ imposed by Beijing.

2 The site area only indicates the surface of one floor while the ground-floor area indicates the whole built area on various floors. The terminology can be deceptive, but that is how one must interpret the figures and the verticalisation of ‘the project’ to maximise the profits.

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