

Background City: Inhabited Urban Conditions of Hong Kong

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Abstract:

The Background City, the city we inhabit but are unable to acknowledge, the city we live in yet fail observe, is collectively dismissed and marginalized by architects who in their unyielding attempt to improve our habitat via new "designs", seem to have lost the ability to appreciate the banal and quotidian urban presence. There are never any architects who claim authorship of the Background City, shame and indignation prevail. By definition the urban "background" is an orphan and circumstantial soul that at best can be described as a default urban byproduct only acknowledged via its antonym, the foreground city.

Contrary to the foreground city, the city that is constantly projected at us with enticing adjectives such as iconic, dynamic and multi-dimensional that never cease in its pursuit of a unique identity, the Background City is preoccupied with coexisting, adapting and avoiding all manifestations of its ego, in short being invisible. The present reality of cities, for better or worse, the "here and now" of our urban existence is shaped by that 99% we arrogantly refuse to discuss, and rather than dismiss such pervasive urban agglomeration this paper seeks to observe and interrogate the mechanisms and traces of this non-city.

The insignificant is paramount when it comes to appreciating the presence of the Background City, a condition rather than a physical place that has little relevant history and where the actual is all that counts. Just as one can never recall the sound of background noise, the background city cannot be reproduced, only recognized. Yet within this infinite sea of homogeneous scenarios, behind the scenes, back-stage lie infinite moments of inhabitation, existences that can only be brought into focus manually, in a manner similar to tuning into a wireless radio, one has to tune in to the right city wavelength to be able to absorb and appreciate its intimate world of micro inhabitation, its invisible latent energy that makes every background scene distinct. We are no longer following a flat and generic urban landscape but have entered a parallel actual world with real urban depth.

Hong Kong embodies the notion of Background City par-excellence, a manufactured metropolis that came into existence accidentally, and is today a largely engineered territory; a city that co-exists with nature in the process generating an artificial state of reclaimed land, underground networks, bridges, retaining walls and other infrastructure elements. Based on the conceptual urban theory of the Italian anthropologist Franco La Cecla "Against City Planning" (2015) this paper will forensically analyze three Hong Kong conditions, articulating how the Background City operates logistically and most importantly without the aid of architects and urban planners to prove that cities are still fundamentally connected to human existence. Rather than anticipate the future architects should re-engage with the invisible networks of the present and in the process reconnect with its inhabitants.