

Reception of Space: Inspiring Design without a Designer

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Abstract. Designers nowadays consider themselves as the only experts to have conceptualized the everyday practice of the ordinary. They deal with design at a fantastic pace, with the aim of satisfying “public interest” instead of designing for individual users. For instance, with the reclaimed area of Hong Kong, which has been transformed into a public space dedicated to facilitate the vibrant transformation of Hong Kong into a world city, the government constantly set up strategies assuming a standardized user practice in order to achieve legislative approval for the project. Actually, the processes of conceptualization and standardization may not sufficiently summarize the specifications of everyday life. In other words, current ways of design based on public interest do not always meet what users actually want and need, since these design methods tend to identify all users as “average people” within standard dimensions. Nevertheless, what we are given every day is an everyday life that is not “banal and meaningless.” The acts of city users cannot be defined merely as mechanical or according to a stereotype. Although users’ reactions or responses to their living environments have been changed gradually with the urban transformation, their behaviours are not simply passive reactions or responses to space, but a kind of active reception in the creative acts or art performed by city users in the space. This research mainly elaborates on the “reception of space” in order to inspire design generations without a designer, and bring designers, planners, administrators, and government a perspective of user-oriented design. It includes an empirical study with intensive observations and direct interviews in Wan Chai North and South to review the importance of considering everyday life in design, based on users’ tactical and creative receptions of public living environments. The study then redefines the role of city users in the urban spaces in which they practice and exercise, and argues that users of urban space require that designs be more inclusive.

Keywords: City Users, Everyday Space, Reception, User-oriented Design.

1 Introduction

When reviewing the urban development of Hong Kong, it is easy to notice that the government does not usually take the time to conduct serious research on what each city user needs. In addition, government designers and planners seldom observe the everyday practices of ordinary people and the degree of fitness between city users’

needs and their living environments. In doing so, designers and planners dealing with “public interest” urban projects that are obviously based on economic-oriented design principles with profit in mind tend to carry out massive urban redevelopment strategies that may swallow up or frustrate the everyday practice of ordinary people. Moreover, as “a land hungry place,” Hong Kong strongly relies on land reclamation approaches to provide inhabitable city space for people and maintain the city’s status as a world city in Asia. Unfortunately, the approaches to reclamation follow the planning principles of administrators who “accompany the deliberate forms of operational rationalism, and tend to neglect the human factor” (Lefebvre, 1996, p. 83). Rational planning emphasizes that the city should be developed under a comprehensive master plan that integrates scientific technology and quantitative analysis. On the face of it, urban diversity has been diminished by rational planners who identify all city users as “average people” in order to easily manage and control city spaces. Public spaces with restrictive standards cannot really fulfil the needs and preferences of the users. Obviously, urban planning design is completely different from product design for individual uses. When conducting urban projects, it is difficult to test the response of public space users in advance, and the users cannot simply select those products that they like and then dismiss the rest (Siu, 2003). Hence, urban design must define users’ responses to their everyday space so that designs and plans can be more inclusive and fitted.

By adopting empirical studies related to the tactical living of users, this paper attempts to argue that the creative acts or art of city users activates the self-motivation driven by their own needs and preferences for a better life and living environment. In other words, the sociology of everyday life gives us a new perspective to contemplate city users’ ways of operating and reveals that city users tactically fix unfit designs without using a designer. Actually, those who create designs for public users are not aware of the degree to which small, everyday practices can inspire design or innovation. Hence, this paper aims to verify that city users are also competent to create self-sufficient designs, and that the government should shift the passive role of city users to motivate design thinking during the design process.

2 Reception of Space

Most of the literature focuses on undertaking urban studies from a macroscopic point of view; studies seldom elaborate detailed research on the everyday lives of ordinary people. However, some sociologists and philosophers, including Michel de Certeau, Henri Lefebvre, and Michel Maffesoli, generally seek to excavate tactical living by looking at users’ everyday practices. They aim to prove that people do not strictly follow the orders imposed by the authorities when it comes to fulfilling the process of production in their lives. Also, according to Lefebvre (1991), everyday life should be “a work of art and the joy that man gives to himself”. Therefore, all individuals are living artists who understand “what is willed to them and what holds them intimately from the inside” (Leuilliot, 1977). Given this, the ways in which city users operate cannot be defined merely as unchanged customs and traditions. Their behaviours represent subjective emotional responses and individual interpretations of the space; thus, they exhibit active participation in the text of life rather than a passive reaction.

In *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), Michel de Certeau begins by studying city users. He substitutes the word “reception” for response, and describes reception as an “art”. This is similar to Cuddon (1998), who regards city users as “receptors,” meaning: “the person (or group of persons) experiencing a work of art” (p. 733). By borrowing the ideas of user reception, urban design theory considers space as a vessel that reflects many innovative acts that are not completely restricted by the city’s form. In short, users’ “reception of space” are the artistic activities and tactical living practices derived from the physical demands of life, rather than the rules of a space.

Unlike widespread perception, which defines city users as passive recipients of space, the concept that they have a reception of space gives us a new perspective on city users’ creativity. This perspective must inspire further design generations in order to ensure that urban spaces are usable. Most of the time, the users play an active role by adopting designs to their own purposes, and attempt to change the design’s original function and purpose in order to fulfil their “individual interest”. Therefore, to understand users’ “reception of space” requires us to base design on our observations and analyses of the “creative acts” or “art” of city users under current living environments and urban policies (de Certeau, 1984, p. 37; Hsia, 1993, p. 329).

3 Methods of Study

In order to better understand city users’ “reception of space”, the most practical method would be to see, listen, smell, touch, and sense the everyday life of city users without putting any obstructive change in their living environments (Siu 2009). Hence, field work will be carried out on selected case study sites in order to conduct an in-depth exploration of the objectives of the research.

3.1 The Case of Wan Chai

As a strategy of design research, a case study is effective for investigating different outcomes in the ambiguous urban space. As Merriam (1988) states, a “case study is an ideal design for understanding and interpreting observations of social phenomena” (p. 2) and “Case study is a design particularly suited to situations where it is impossible to separate the phenomenon’s variables from their context[s]” (p. 10). In order to get “real-life context,” this research has adopted unobtrusive observation to gain understanding of the ways in which city users interact with public urban space. This method can “cover events in real time and cover the context of an event” (Yin 1994, pp. 13, 18).

In order to form an in-depth understanding of “reception of space” in terms of urban design and policy, this study selected Wan Chai as a case. Wan Chai is an ever-transforming urban area located in Hong Kong Island. Its particularity stems from urban reclamations and multimodal living spaces that have resulted in a hybrid urbanism for this area and a clear demarcation between Wan Chai North (newer area) and South (older area) by a major road (Gloucester Road). This study is based on comparing Wan Chai North to Wan Chai South, as different kinds of people interact with different types of public spaces in these areas. Such spaces include traditional market streets, main arterial roads, pedestrian bridges, and waterfront promenades. Meanwhile,

the comparative works also provide a view to prove that city users' "reception of space" can generate extensive feedbacks to benefit urban design and sustainable development.

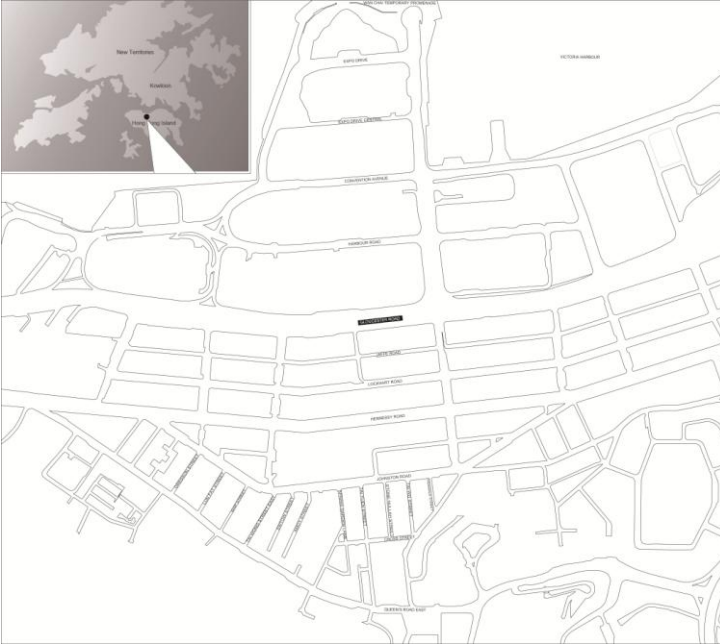


Fig. 1. Wan Chai with its north-south demarcation. The area north of Gloucester Road is often called Wan Chai North, and it is one of the busiest commercial areas in Hong Kong. It comprises business towers, hotels, spectacular buildings, and landmarks. The spaces in Wan Chai South are mixed-use, mostly involving ground floor retail shops and restaurants with residential, office, and other uses above.

3.2 Observations and Interviews

Observation is a good approach "of looking at action between people and their environment" (Sanoff, 1992, p. 33), conducive to discovering "what goes on in the subculture or organizations being studied" and gaining "insight into their operation (especially hidden aspects not easily recognized) and how they function" (Berger, 1998, p. 105). Nevertheless, field observations should focus on appropriate methods and objects of observation, in order to be effective (Rutledge, 1985). Sanoff (1992) further points out that "Observing unobtrusively allows the study of people's behavior without their realizing that their activities are important" (p. 33). Thus, "unobtrusive direct observations" have been adopted in the studies to illustrate how city users interact with their living environments and deal with public spaces and products. This study has produced a new set of methods for observing public spaces, which includes fixed-point continuous photo capture techniques within longitudinal studies. In addition, the direct interviews have been used to clarify the data collected in observations,

in order to assess not only “What have people done?” but also “Why have people done it?” (Berger, 1998, pp. 55–62). Thereby, the observation and interviews conducted in this study can acquire a more genuine picture of users’ reception of public spaces.

4 A New Perspective to See City Users’ Everyday Practices

In this section, the arguments offer us valuable insight into how city users deal with public spaces and products, and indicate the disparity of users’ receptions of urban development and public use space in Wan Chai North and South. According to the empirical field studies, the authorities tend to attain a higher level of social order in the northern (newer) area of Wan Chai than in the southern (older) area. Thus, the government seeks authority through legislation to manage city spaces, and confine unwanted behaviours to Wan Chai South. Rational planning such as this leads to less participation of the individual user in public spaces, which also makes designs or products meaningless. In Wan Chai South, there is a high-degree of urban diversity that manifests how the city users exercise their living environment, although the constructed environment and urban facilities look old and timeworn. The people prefer to engage with the space without any restrictions, which on the other hand can give design its meaning, and can help researchers to discover design issues in a space by assessing the everyday practice of city users in that space. The nature of life motivates tactical behaviours that we never even dream of in design; this kind of user participation and tactics can be called an act of production. These acts can help us rethink what the public spaces provide people and thereby design products that fit users’ needs.

4.1 Reception of Space in Wan Chai North

Wan Chai North has a markedly mono-functional design of space compared to the southern area. The functions of its various spaces are clearly zoned and controlled by authorities and planners. For example, the areas between Convention Avenue and Gloucester Road are only zoned for office and commercial users. Thus, the area was composed of a number of free-standing single buildings. Each individual building was rationally and logically located in the area, with clear and conspicuous demarcations. Furthermore, open spaces have been designated in the form of playgrounds, parks, and gardens. However, the government and private owners impose different rules and restrictions on use of the space in order to prevent unacceptable behaviours and to maintain social order.

Different types of people and activities are segregated in mono-functional zones. For example, the Golden Bauhinia Square (in proximity to Wan Chai Waterfront Promenade) only attracts tourists, and only permitted hawkers are allowed to do business there. Furthermore, the trading areas and types of commodities have also been controlled by the administration: only paintings and photographs are approved to be sold. In addition, the administration is likely to more stringently impose regulations and take enforcement action to secure the “ideal” social order. Another example is

that, in order to construct a world city and provide inhabitable city spaces for people, the Hong Kong government has built many neat public spaces in Wan Chai North. However, people do not use these spaces because there are too many restrictions on their use. Some public facilities have merely been seen as public displays. As the administration emphasizes regulation and public order in this area, people only perform necessary activities, such as walking to another place, waiting for a bus, delivering mail, or smoking. Thus we see that designs with excessive controls and restrictions are at risk of being wasted spaces; they do not become functional spaces without user participation and practice.

Table 1. The public space with many restrictions



Dealing with Space	Description	Reception of Space
	<p>In the public space of Northern Wan Chai, ordinances and restrictions have been set up to secure ideal social order.</p>	<p>There are no more responses and reactions between the users and environment, which means the design is not given its proper meaning.</p>

Table 2. The public facilities with many constraints

Dealing with Product	Description	Reception of Space
	<p>The government has set up some constraints in order to eliminate the unwanted behaviours of sleeping or lying on benches.</p>	<p>The public facility has become a public display rather than a comfortable product for people's leisure.</p>

4.2 Reception of Space in Wan Chai South

In the Southern Wan Chai area, most of the spaces and buildings were developed and constructed in mixed-use patterns. Mixed-use developments contain a complementary

conglomeration of space usage, such as residential, retail, commercial, employment, civic, and entertainment spaces, in close proximity—sometimes in the same building. This leads to a high degree of pedestrian diversity and interaction. Streets in Wan Chai South attract people mainly because of the diverse human activities that can be found there, rather than because they contain a “well-designed” landmark or sculpture.

For instant, Cross Street and Tai Yuen Street, located between Queen’s Road East and Johnston Road, are typical open-air bazaars. They are not simply places where one can buy daily necessities, but also a favourite place for people to meet, gather, stroll, rest, and window-shop. In fact, both street markets have become a kind of urban facility that people engage with every day. As a facilitator and designer of the space, the stall owner provides the necessities of the urban facility, such as a chair for rest, a table for the storage of goods, and a handcart for carrying items, in order to make people more comfortable in the space.

A high degree of pedestrian diversity can be found on these streets. Mixed-use spaces that attract a diverse cross-section of the population (for example, locals and tourists; women, children, and the elderly; students, workers, and businessmen) are more likely to be liveable and exciting. Due to the variety of functions possible in the space, public spaces are redefined sometimes as chatting places by older people, as activity places by performers, as demonstration places by protestors, and so on. For example, a public space near Johnston Road was designed originally for smoking and circulation. However, the city users produced another meaning and function of this space, which they exercised on Christmas Eve. At that time, a group of performers wearing Christmas caps converted the space into a theatre and sang Christmas carols to attract people for enjoyment.

The use of Hennessy Road is another good example of how the city user’s “reception of space” is not always what the designer had planned. Originally, this street was used for vehicle traffic. In order to facilitate social democracy, the city users are allowed to tactically deploy some slogans and facilities—that is, to protest. The use of this space for demonstrations thus redefined the functions of the street. Tolerance for diverse social activities in the southern Wan Chai area is higher than in the northern Wan Chai area. Hence, the city users may be seen as spatial producers, who aim to make up for the deficiencies of design and product when using spaces in Wan Chai South.

As shown below, public facilities and products present all kinds of design meanings and functions for people’s everyday lives. In short, innovation and generation of design should derive from the everyday practice of individual users in order for designs to fit the users; users should play an active role in design to enhance the space’s meaning and function.

Table 3. Public Spaces in Another Function and Meaning





Deal with Space	Description	Reception of Space
	<p>In general, the street market provides some necessities for everyday life. However, it can be a public facility sometimes, as well, where old people can sit and rest.</p>	<p>The stall owner, as a true spatial producer, understands the needs of users and has filled in design gaps and functional defects.</p>
	<p>The public space is actually designed for meeting and smoking. On Christmas Eve, this place became a theatre for singing Christmas carols.</p>	<p>The city users present a strong sense of self-motivation driven by the needs of everyday life.</p>
	<p>Normally, this street is a major road for circulation. When it was time for the procession, the street was transformed into a place of demonstration.</p>	<p>The creative acts and art of city users are able to redefine design meaning, which can be called an act of production.</p>

Table 4. Public Facilities in Another Function and Meaning

Deal with Product	Description	Reception of Space
	<p>At this bus stop in Wan Chai, many older people sit on the fire hydrant to have a rest while they wait for the bus.</p>	<p>Different types of users compose urban diversity and behavioural hybridity. The city users in Wan Chai South are good at creating living tactics to make public spaces and facilities fulfil their preferences and needs. Furthermore, the city users are not as banal as they are identified in northern Wan Chai. They have created some unexpected acts of creation and transformation that designers and planners never considered.</p>
	<p>In Wan Chai South, railings are intended as a measure of safety, but people also sit and lie upon them.</p>	
	<p>Originally, the traffic cone was placed on the road to temporarily redirect traffic in a safe manner. However, the old man usually stores something in a traffic cone.</p>	

5 Conclusion

City users still play a passive role in the design process, since designers and planners are deemed to be the people who have the expertise to provide good city space and products for people. However, blindly relying on designers' knowledge and responsibility ignores the city user's paramount role in the process of design interaction and communication. Therefore, I wonder whether designs could be improved without the expertise of designers. This paper suggests that we have to shift our attention from the designer and design to the individual user. This shift of attention aims to explore and understand the small practices of everyday life in order to inspire designers, planners, professionals, administrators, and governments to create more usable space. For example, much of the designs mentioned above were redefined by the tactical behaviours of city users; given this, it makes sense that the users should be active

participants in the design process, as their life experiences and daily use of the space will inform gaps in the designer's "expertise".

Urban transformation has also become a process that places city users in a passive role. The studies of this research illustrate that rational planning was used as an active force to segregate people and streets. The government set up many constraints and restrictions to control the city space. For instance, the authorities have imposed some organized public spaces in Wan Chai North with different limitations and ordinances in order to maintain social order. As a result, the design becomes a display, and loses its functional meaning for the everyday lives of potential users. Thus we see that designs with excessive controls will create a negative "reception of space", which can result in the generation of a soulless city.

This paper provides us a user-oriented perspective. By perusing users' reception of design in their everyday lives, the designer should respect and recognize the diversity of users' needs and lifestyles in order to create more inclusive, usable designs.

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