

**Urban identity in Hong Kong's New Town:  
A case study of Tung Chung's urban morphology**

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**Abstract**

*Despite the ambitions of the government to develop 'balanced developments', new towns in Hong Kong have long been criticised as 'dormitory towns'; the community has little connection with the place and a low sense of belonging and satisfaction. This paper examines the relationship between the urban morphology of new towns and the creation of culture, identity and social connection –and thus a sense of place, arguably an essential element to build a resilient and inclusive community. A long history of scholarly studies looked into how mega blocks negatively affect the vibrancy of street life and suggested that smaller blocks and mixed-use programs facilitate a stronger community that boasts its character. However, few examined how urban forms affect the sense of identity and culture of new towns in Asia. Using the theoretical framework of Lefebvre's Production of Space (1991), I will compare the designed city with the lived experience of daily life. This research compares built forms of several new towns developed in different phases in Hong Kong and then zooms in to Tung Chung through urban analysis. The comparison reveals that street blocks in newer new towns are increasingly larger and are void of street culture. A series of interviews with local stakeholders, reviews of local news reports and site observations further reveal first-hand experiences of residents. This allows us to draw a direct relationship between Tung Chung's urban forms - mainly its density, street network, block size and poor distribution of civic amenities - and residents' lack of sense of ownership. The population of Tung Chung is forecasted to triple and reach 270,000 in the coming decade, while Hong Kong is proactively developing plans for large-scale construction at its peripheries; this research hence serves as an important and timely insight for future policymaking, planning and design.*

**Keywords:** Cultural identity, Urban Politics, Urban morphology, New Town, Hong Kong

**Introduction**

In the post-World War II, industrialising economies in Asia new towns were actively developed to house the growing population and improve living conditions in the crowded inner cities. In Asia, Hong Kong has one of the largest and oldest new town programmes, starting in the 1960s and now housing half of the city's population. Much of the literature refers to the unaccomplished target of 'self-containment' both in earlier accounts (Bristow, 1989, Hills and Yeh, 1983) and more recent assessments (He et al., 2020a, He et al., 2020b, Yeh, 2021). Although there are notable exceptions (Van Dijk and Weitkamp, 2018, Zacharias, 2005), much of these accounts focus primarily on quantifiable descriptions.

This paper introduces a study on the correlation between morphology and urban identity in a new town in Hong Kong. It follows the evolution of Hong Kong's new towns through three generations, showing a trend of increased plot sizes and a decrease of public facilities, creating dormitory towns that show little sense of place, while residents feel that their basic needs are not fulfilled. In particular, Tung Chung, the latest new town, has a high level of segregation between public and private housing areas on large scale plots. At the

same time, civic amenities are poorly distributed, and cultural facilities lack entirely. Due to tightly managed public and private residential estates, there is little entrepreneurial activity on the ground, while the urban 'centre' is formed by a mall. Arguably, not the quality of space was prioritised during its planning, but the focus was on quantitative factors, including economic concerns and housing shortages in the city (He et al., 2020b, Yeh, 2021). This, however, has significant consequences for the quality of everyday life of the residents. In this study, the framework of Lefebvre's Spatial Triad (1991) will be loosely adapted to compare the conceived, abstract, planned city with the experienced and physical, to critically re-assess the making of urban space and the effectiveness of the conceived masterplans.

## **Background**

'On the face of it, the city is two things: a large collection of buildings linked by space, and a complex system of human activity linked by interaction' (Vaughan, 2007). In recent decades, space has been analysed in relation to broader social-economic processes and social justice. Geographers such as Harvey (1996) and Soja (1996) have looked at urban space as a key instrument within the neoliberal shift in urban policymaking. Much of this work is influenced by the writings of Henri Lefebvre, in particular the concept of the production of space (1991). He set out his theory on the complex character of space and how it enters social life at all levels: both as a product to be consumed and a means of production. Lefebvre proposed a triple dialectic that ties together the mental, the physical and the social to argue that space is at the same time conceived, perceived and lived. Conceived space is constructed by governments, planners and architects through urban visionary documents, drawings and masterplans. Perceived space describes the routines of the practices of everyday life in a physical environment, produced by society through the inhabitation of the space. Social space refers to the experienced space 'through its associated images and symbols, hence the space of its 'inhabitants' and 'users' (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 39). The three spaces are not separate realities but rather 'features of a single – and ever-changing – reality' (Lehtovuori, 2010). In the making of urban space, the neoliberal focus often gets the upper hand: 'Ideologically, technically, and politically, the quantitative [conceived] has become the rule, norm, and value [while] the qualitative [lived] is worn down. Anything that cannot be quantified is eliminated. The generalised terrorism of the quantifiable accentuates the efficiency of repressive space, amplifies it without fear of reproach, all the more so because of its self-justifying nature (ideo-logic), its apparent scientificity' (Lefebvre, 2003 quoted in Buser, 2012, p. 294).

## **Methodology**

Utilising Lefebvre's theoretical framework as the base for a methodological approach in considering the production of Hong Kong's new towns, I will analyse, first, the urban morphology of four typical new towns within different generations as the product of large-scale town planning in which quantitative factors are increasingly considered superior to the qualitative, despite the government's ambitions to create improved living environments. Second, based on empirical observations, informal interviews with a wide range of urban

stakeholders<sup>1</sup> and a review of local media reports, we will assess how certain factors influence the daily life of its inhabitants in the most recent new town of Tung Chung.

## **History of new towns**

A total of nine new towns were developed in three generations in Hong Kong since the 1960s. The major aim of the new town programme was 'to cope with the increase in population and to improve the living environment by decentralising the population from the over-crowded urban districts' (Civil Engineering and Development Department, 2016). These towns were built at the city's peripheries, typically at reclamation sites and around existing villages by the sea (Van Dijk and Weitkamp, 2018). As of 2016, the nine new towns accommodated 3.47 million people, with an expected population of 3.63 million in 2021. Tung Chung is currently undergoing a new extension, which will see the first intake of residents in 2024. As illustrated in various literature and government reports, new towns in Hong Kong were developed with the idea of reaching 'balanced development' (Chan, 2001, Garrett, 2015, He et al., 2020a), defined as 'a complex inter-related system which, at any point of time, should be able to stand by itself as a viable entity' (Xue, 2013). Such a self-contained ideal should not only apply to housing and job provision, but also to social, educational and health services, and community support facilities (Scott, 1982, Hills and Yeh, 1983). Furthermore, new towns are deemed to provide better living environments with transport links, modern infrastructure, community facilities, generous recreation and amenity areas (Chan, 2001). Based on these concepts, the urban morphology of one of each of the new town generations was reviewed, in addition to that of Tung Chung (see Appendix 1); findings are summarised below and in table 1.

## **Urban morphology of four typical new towns**

The first-generation new town of Shatin was planned in the 1960s on a river mouth in a district holding several settlements. As in many new towns, the area around the Mass Transit Railway (MTR) station is the heart of the town, integrated within a commercial complex. Nearby, offices, a hotel and a town- and concert hall were built – although the latter was only completed 25 years after the designation of the new town. This area consists of a series of connected podiums, creating a fully connected landscape across residential developments despite the relatively large plots separated by roads on the ground floor.

The second generation of new towns were expansions of existing market towns and villages. The twin towns of Fanling and Sheung Shui were upgraded to new town status in 1979. The urban morphology shows a mixed typology in the central area, combining the old, irregular buildings of the old market town, low-rise blocks

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<sup>1</sup> *Tung Chung functioned as a research site within a year-long Advanced Research and Design Studio for an M-Arch programme, during which lectures, debates and interviews took place with a wide range of urban stakeholders, including representatives of government town planning, urban planning consultancy firms, local district councillors, NGO's, residents and entrepreneurs.*

and high-rise towers. The city centre is stretched between the old town and the new MTR station and contains a new commercial market, malls and a town hall, and.

Tin Shui Wai, a third-generation new town, was built on reclaimed fish ponds and was a joint venture between the government and the private sector (Yeh, 2021). Plot sizes are universally very large and the road network consists of main roads and destination-based cul-de-sacs. The MTR station is located at the far southern end of the new town. The southern parts were developed first and have some urban qualities such as a park and a shopping mall. The northern part, constructed in a second phase and addressing major housing shortages, lacks almost any kind of civic or commercial facilities and has no cultural facilities. There is no consolidated centre and mono-functional residential programming.

Tung Chung is the latest new town, built predominantly on reclaimed land, and is largely structured by the highway and railroad leading from the urban centre to the airport. The large-scale island-like plots between the infrastructure are developed as high-end communities by private developers. Public housing is located in two districts south of the centre, the largest of which (Yat Tung Estate) is far away from the centre. Public amenities (a library, sports facilities and a municipal services building) are predominantly located nearby private residential areas. There is no cultural infrastructure except for a small museum. The town centre is formed by an outlet mall next to the station, developed jointly by Hong Kong's five largest developers. Most private developments are built by the same five plus the MTR Corporation.

**Table 1. Four typical new towns. Data based on Civil Engineering and Development Department (2016) and Planning Department (2019), and observations of urban morphology.**

<b>New town [generation]</b>	<b>Shatin [1]</b>	<b>Sheung Shui [2]</b>	<b>Tin Shui Wai [3]</b>	<b>Tung Chung (incl. extension area) [4]</b>
<b>Year of designation</b>	1965	1979	1982	1992
<b>Area (hectares)</b>	3,591	667	430	n/a (265)
<b>Population (2016)</b>	691,000	261,000	290,000	80,000
<b>Planned population</b>	771,000	290,000	306,000	268,000
<b>Street network</b>	Urban grid	Urban grid	Large roads & Cul-de-sacs	Highways, Large roads & Cul-de-sacs
<b>Land Use</b>	Mixed	Mixed	Residential	Residential & commercial
<b>Urban centre</b>	Yes	Yes	No	Commercial centre
<b>Civic &amp; cultural infrastructure</b>	Centralised at the town centre	Centralised at the town centre	Scattered and scarce civic facilities, no cultural infrastructure	No cultural infrastructure, scattered and scarce civic facilities

Hence, while older new towns have a mixed-use urban fabric with centralised transportation and civic facilities, the younger generations generally fail to provide such infrastructure. In what follows, I will counterpose the planned and lived conditions of Tung Chung.

### **Planning of Tung Chung**

Tung Chung was conceived to support the new airport and to be, essentially, the 'Gateway of Hong Kong' (Planning Department, 2019, Wang and Wong, 1998). The new town was to become 'a hub of providing commercial, cultural, community and recreational activities serving Tung Chung and the wider area of Lantau Island' and provide a residential area for airport staff. The town centre was planned to be next to the MTR station with community facilities and a commercial cluster. In 2012, the Tung Chung New Town Extension area was designed to essentially triple the current population. The concept of 'balanced development' still serves as one of the goals of the extension area, reflecting its importance over the decades. The topical paper 'Planning and Urban Design for a Liveable High-Density City' on the latest territorial development strategy reveals the current planning rationale of the government: in addition to land use mix, transport connectivity and accessibility, concepts of cyclability, walkability and permeability (avoid 'large impermeable urban blocks' and promote 'human scale and fine-grain street grids') are encouraged. There is also a strong focus on Lynch's concept of imageability to create a 'unique, diverse and vibrant city', promoting use-mix and time-mix, active street frontages, street vibrancy, public art and more (Planning Department, 2016).

### **Daily life in Tung Chung**

Despite the planning intent to create a self-contained town, the reality shows otherwise. Media reports reflect NGOs' and residents' complaints over the lack of street life, mainly the lack of shops, facilities and amenities necessary for daily life. 'To buy daily necessities, residents had to take a 10-minute bus ride to the shopping mall near the Tung Chung MTR station' (Lam, 2018). According to interviews with local NGOs and district councillors, the pricing of the existing privately-run markets is unaffordable for public housing residents. Many prefer buying cheaper groceries in large portions near their workplace or commuting 45 minutes to other markets. The Chief Executive gave the promise of a wet market: 'Based on our new thinking on governance focused on bringing benefits and convenience to the public, we will make resources available for building new public markets to offer wider choices of fresh provisions in Tung Chung, Tin Shui Wai and Hung Shui Kiu' (Office of the Chief Executive, 2017). However, no signs of progress are found. Since 2016, attempts by residents to create temporary markets have encountered difficulties in finding suitable venues and government bureaucracy (Tsang and Kwan, 2017).

The experience of Tung Chung is not integrated and mixed: 'Although Tung Chung is large, space is divided by the government's planning. Each place has its own functions, but it may not meet the needs of residents. Even the newly built Ying Tung Estate seems to deliberately be separated from the private estates and be left

alone.' (Ng, 2017) Site observations show wide streets of Tung Chung with few pedestrians and no street-level activities. Residents usually head to the town centre just for the MTR station, but not for shopping or community and recreational activities as the mall is beyond budget, while large parks, library and sports centres are located nearby private housing estates in the east. They are not conveniently positioned, separated by highway and connected only by the mall. Most residents, therefore, resort to spending time within their public housing estates, equipped with few facilities and socialising venues.

## Conclusions

Comparing the designed, the built, and the lived spaces of new towns show large discrepancies between ambitions and reality. The increasing size of the plots in Hong Kong's new towns, along with the mono-functional programming and lack of city centre with cultural and civic amenities, are visible in an urban morphology analysis and directly affect the qualitative aspects of everyday life. The size of the plots is critical to a city's design, as it separates public and private domains, and thus has the opportunity to lay a foundation for a mixed-use program, as Jacobs (1972) already observed. 'The definition of the plots system in a given territory is an essential element of its urbanisation process and has a considerable stability over time' (Oliveira, 2016). What is mainly lacking in Tung Chung is a spatial allowance for what Crawford has called 'everyday space', a concept based on Lefebvre's theories on the importance of practices of everyday life to give meaning to a designed city. 'The city is, above all, a social product, created out of the demands of everyday use and the social struggles of urban inhabitants. Design within everyday space must start with an understanding and acceptance of the life that takes place there. This goes against the grain of professional design discourse, which is based on abstract principles, whether quantitative, formal, spatial, or perceptual.' (Crawford, 1999). Indeed, despite ambitions to promote mixed-use developments, in reality, the quantitative prevails in Hong Kong's planning system, resulting in increasingly large plots, tightly managed by private and public management companies. It lacks opportunities for everyday urbanism, and thereby the possibility to create localised and unique meanings, and thus urban identity.

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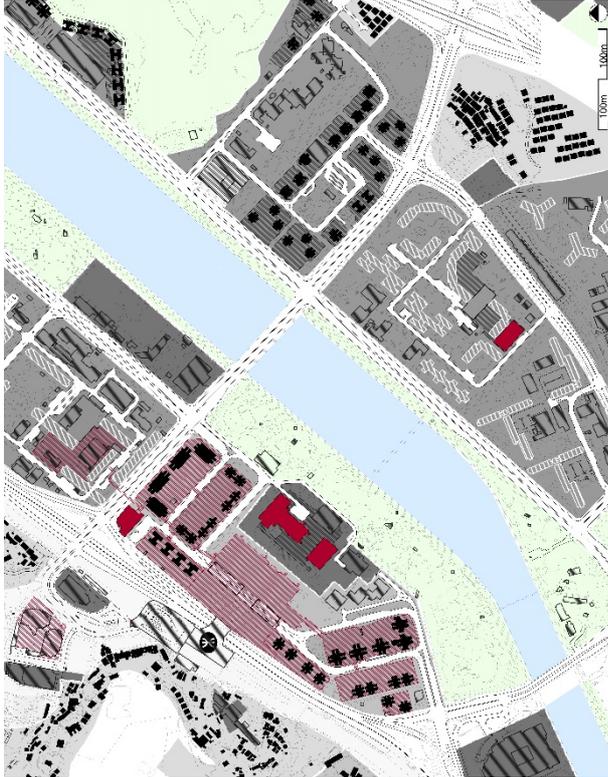
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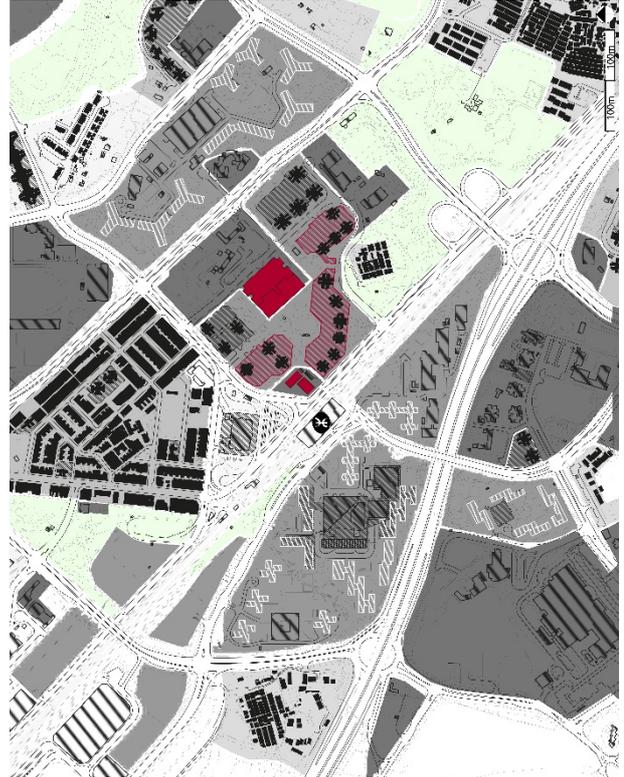
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# APPENDIX 1

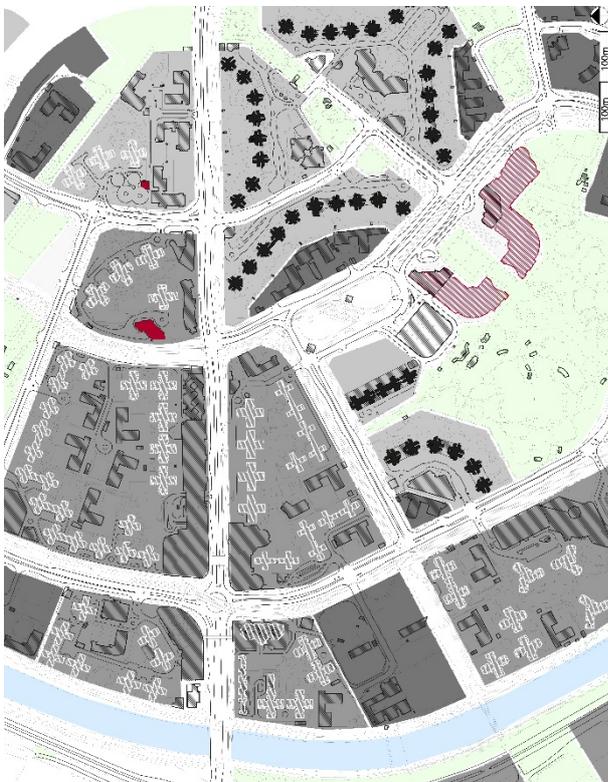
Morphological maps of central areas of selected of Hong Kong's new towns



Shatin, source: the author



Sheung Shui, source: the author



Tin Shui Wai, source: the author



Tung Chung, source: the author