

Between Control and Creativity: Informal Street Culture in Hong Kong's High-Density Public Spaces

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Abstract

Street culture in Hong Kong manifests through busking, community gatherings, street art and festive parades, transforming limited pedestrian environments into vital spaces for encounter and expression. However, recent regulatory closures have intensified tension between creativity and control, and there is limited understanding of the interrelation between spatial policies and spontaneous practices at the micro-scale. This research explores how spontaneous street culture and informal urban practices promote vitality and social resilience in Hong Kong's public space through qualitative methods including spatial observation, mapping, and interviews across three site typologies: central districts (Mong Kok, Tsim Sha Tsui, Central), Fanling New Town, and Wong Chuk Hang Emerging Art District. Findings reveal distinct behavioural patterns shaped by specific spatial logics. Central districts are characterised by a competitive politics of rotation, where mobile performers strive for exposure in narrow spaces during evening peaks; Fanling New Town uses spatial redundancy in open plazas to support inclusive community gatherings among marginalised groups; and Wong Chuk Hang encourages experimental, non-immediate artistic appropriation through graffiti and traces. Synthesising these observations, the study identifies five recurring typologies of informal cultural practices: expressive performances, interactive artistic interventions, collective community gatherings, spontaneous play, and artistic occupation of industrial space. These typologies collectively illustrate how informal activities adapt to distinct urban conditions. The findings demonstrate that informal practices are adaptive strategies that reconstruct spatial boundaries and reintroduce collective action into urban life, contributing to the broader discourse on urban informality, liveability and cultural sustainability in high-density cities.

Keywords

urban informality, spontaneous urban practices, spatial redundancy, politics of rotation, street culture

1. Introduction

Hong Kong's public space resources are extremely limited, and streets are forced to support transportation, commerce and social needs simultaneously (Shelton et al., 2011; Ng & Cook, 2020). The central district is highly controlled, the new town is functionally rigid, and the industrial zone is in the process of regeneration and transformation (Tieben, 2016; Lai & Yung, 2022; Evans, 2009). Such urban structure provides a distinct growing ground for informal cultural practices, while leading to conflicts between civic usage and governmental supervision (Mehta, 2019; Lai & Zhou, 2020).

In such a high-density and tightly governed urban structure, informal cultural practices, such as busking, community gatherings, street art and festive parades, have become essential ways of public expression for different groups. In recent years, the street performance groups in central districts, community gatherings in Fan-ling and street culture traces on the facades of industrial buildings in Wong Chuk Hang have shown the diversity and resilience of street culture in Hong Kong, even these practices often negotiate spatial constraints and regulatory tensions (Tieben, 2016; Lai & Zhou, 2020; Kamalipour & Peimani, 2020). Recent cases such as the closure of the Sai Yeung Choi Street South pedestrian zone highlight ongoing tensions between vibrant street culture and governance. There remains a lack of micro-scale, spatially grounded research on how such practices actually develop across different urban contexts including central districts, new towns, and in-

dustrial zones.

Cities face problems of high density, spatial inequality, and a 'democratic reduction' in public spaces (Hou, 2020). These issues resonate strongly in Hong Kong, where informal daily activities not only activate the streets but also challenge the boundaries between formal planning and the urban community life. Therefore, understanding these practices is of great value in promoting more inclusive, culturally sustainable, and spatially just public space design.

This study focuses on three questions: What spatial characteristics in Hong Kong's public space contribute to spontaneous cultural activities? How can performers, participants and observers take part in informal cultural practices in different urban environments? How do governance and spatial conditions shape the differences between new towns, commercial centres and emerging art districts? The research explores the informality and street culture of Hong Kong's public space by examining the emergence mode, promoter, service target and spatial dynamics of spontaneous urban practices. It focuses on residents, street performers and community participants to understand how street culture promotes urban vitality and shapes daily public life in high-density public spaces.

2. Theoretical Foundations: Street Culture and Informality

In existing urban design research, informal spaces are usually generated and maintained by users in a spontaneous, gradual or consultative

manner, showing flexibility, versatility and characteristics closely related to socio-economic activities (Roy, 2015; Lutzoni, 2016). In the Hong Kong context, informality has become a strategy for residents to reshape public life under space and regulatory restrictions (Tieben, 2016; Lai & Yung, 2022). However, recent events, such as the closure of Sai Yeung Choi Street South and the restriction of street performances, have highlighted the ongoing tension between creativity, business and regulation. Street performances once revitalised the streets, but with the increase in complaints such as noise and obstruction of traffic, the authorities finally terminated the plan, reflecting the emergence of regulations that failed to accommodate diversified informal practices, thus triggering a governance dilemma (Sum, 2018).

Existing research on the informality of public space emphasises that informal urban practices are not just illegal or temporary occupation of space, but also an adaptive mechanism to cope with spatial, social and economic constraints (Lai & Zhou, 2020). Rupprecht et al. (2015) and Ng and Cook (2020) believe that informality is a spatial strategy that highly regulates people's daily survival and creativity in cities. In Hong Kong, where public space is intensively managed and commercialised, such informal uses are often transferred to transitional or residual urban areas, such as back alleys, under pedestrian overpasses, building concession areas and surplus space under viaducts (Lai & Yung, 2022). These conditions reveal the persistent tension between formal urban planning and spontaneous cultural appropriation.

Henri Lefebvre's (1968) notion of the 'right to the city' provides a theoretical foundation for understanding these practices as citizens' attempts to reclaim participation and visibility in urban life. From this perspective, informality becomes not an exception to planning, but a claim for spatial justice and representation. Michel Foucault's (1986) concept of 'heterotopia' also clarifies how alternative or 'other' spaces serve as places of deviation and resistance, in which informal practices temporarily suspend the mainstream urban order, such as viaducts, squares or street corners. These heterotopic spaces in Hong Kong often host various cultural and social activities, such as street performances, flash markets, community gatherings, street art and daily leisure activities, which reflect both adaptations to control and subtle resistance to control (Hou, 2020; Kamalipour & Peimani, 2019; Lai & Yung, 2022).

The research on street culture and spontaneous urban practices highlights the important role of informal cultural activities in activating public life and shaping urban identity, such as street performances, dances and community performances. Simpson (2011) pointed out that street performances serve as catalysts for cultural communication, transforming ordinary streets into a temporary stage for interaction and self-expression. Similarly, Ho and Au (2021) also observed that such performances not only enrich vitality of the city but also build a common sense of belonging between different users. These studies demonstrate that street culture is not merely an entertainment, but an informal form of civic participation, which redefines the

use and perception of public space.

In the book *The Cultures of Cities*, Sharon Zukin (1995) interpreted the city as a field of mutual games between creativity and regulation. In Hong Kong, this tension is reflected in the management of street performances, art exhibitions, and small community activities, reflecting the broader struggle between public freedom and urban governance. Ng and Cook (2020) and Lai and Yung (2022) further pointed out that Hong Kong's public-private boundaries are increasingly blurred, giving rise to semi-public spaces such as shopping malls, transportation hubs and open platforms, where informal practices continue through consultation rather than direct confrontation.

From this perspective, informal cultural activities such as busking, dance gatherings, or graffiti should be regarded as the embodiment of daily civic awareness and cultural resilience. They redefine public space as a place for participation and dialogue, not a place for consumption or regulation. These spontaneous performances, gatherings, and creative behaviours maintain the social and emotional vitality of urban life, highlighting that informality is both an urban condition and a cultural phenomenon.

There remains limited research on how these practices operate in an East Asian urban environment with scarce space, strict rules and regulations, and a high degree of commercialisation (Lai & Yung, 2022; Ng & Cook, 2020; Villani & Talamini, 2023). In addition, most existing studies regard informal activities as isolated events, ignoring the analysis of their spatial patterns,

time rhythms and interactions with the built environment (Kamalipour & Peimani, 2020; Lutzoni, 2016). Therefore, there remains a gap in understanding how spontaneous street culture emerges, adapts, and sustains itself within Hong Kong's unique socio-spatial conditions.

To address this gap, the present study combines field observation, mapping, and qualitative questionnaires to reveal how informal cultural activities negotiate the boundaries between regulation and spontaneity, and how they reshape public space as an arena of everyday creativity and social interaction. This methodological approach is directly informed by the theoretical perspectives outlined above: Lefebvre's (1968) 'right to the city' shaped the questionnaire focus on participant motivations, while Foucault's (1986) concept of 'heterotopia' guided the selection of observation sites and structuring of spatial protocols across the three study typologies. By grounding empirical investigation in these foundations, the study moves beyond isolated event descriptions toward a spatially grounded understanding of informal practice as adaptive urban strategy.

3. Methods: A Comparative Spatial Approach

This research adopted a mixed qualitative and design-based methodology. Three areas were selected for research: Mong Kok, Tsim Sha Tsui and Central in the city centre; the new towns Fanling and Sheung Shui; and the Emerging Art District Wong Chuk Hang (Figure 1). A small-scale group study focused on street performers, street dance teams, flash art groups and com-

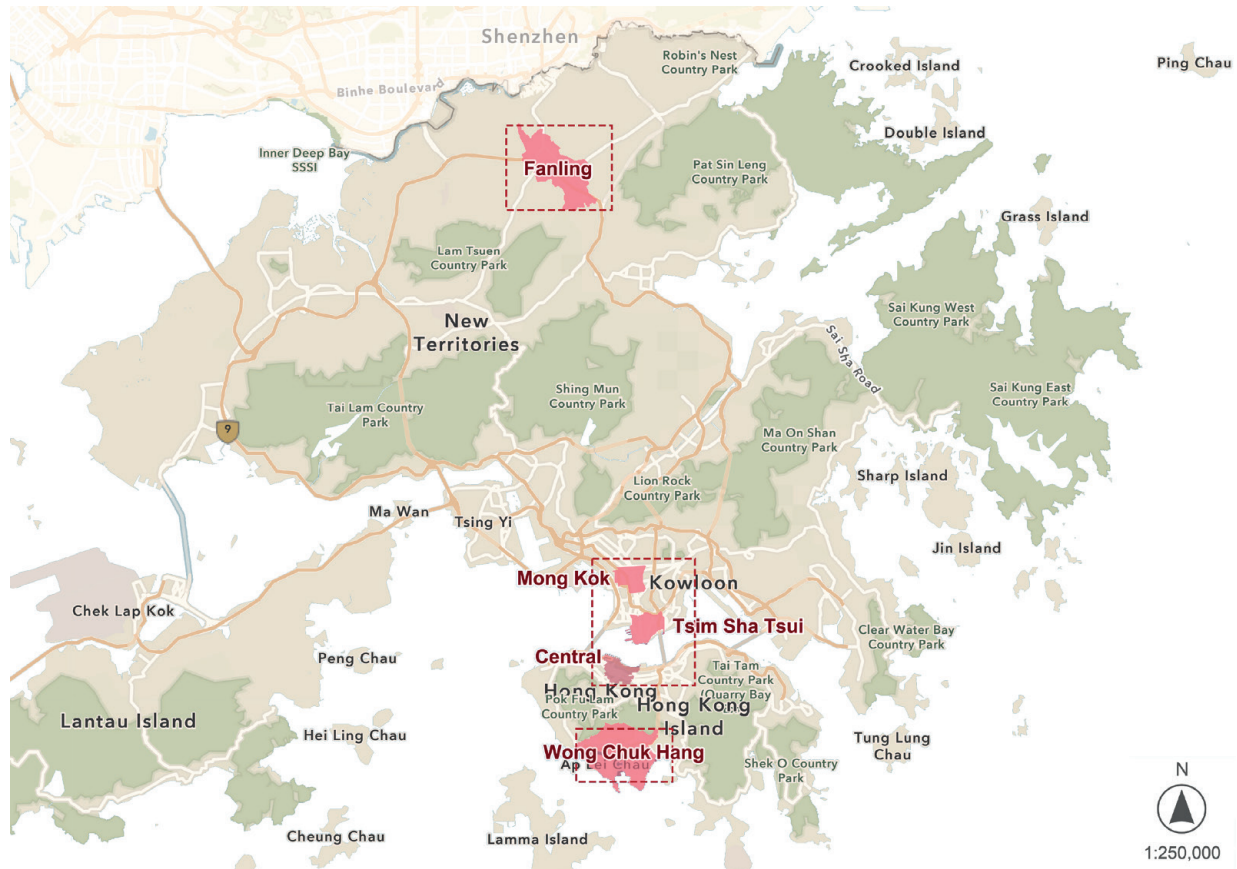


Figure 1. Selected sites in Hong Kong.

munity groups have been conducted, drawing on the participatory ethnographic methods of scholars such as de Certeau (1984) and Mehta (2019). The study examined their mobility patterns, the relationship between performers and audiences, and their adaptive strategies to cope with space and management constraints.

The research adopted a multi-scalar field observation and spatial mapping approach, drawing

upon precedents such as Whyte (1980), Certeau (1984), Mehta (2019), and Gehl (2011), who emphasised direct observation and behavioural mapping as essential tools for understanding everyday public life, to explore public space informality and street culture in Hong Kong. Following field observation, semi-structured interviews and brief questionnaires were conducted with street performers, residents, community organisers, and municipal officers to explore

Type	Site	Key Characteristics	Research Focus
Commercial Core	Mong Kok / Tsim Sha Tsui / Central	High-density, performance-driven spaces with buskers and culture expression	Tensions between regulation, commerce, and creative use
New Town Context	Fanling / Sheungshui	Semi-structured plazas and transport hubs with community-scale performances	How small-scale, local cultural acts enrich everyday life
Emerging Art District	Wong Chuk Hang	Post-industrial spaces re-appropriated for art, graffiti, and youth expression	Transformation of former industrial areas into informal creative zones

Table 1. Comparative Framework of Site Typologies and Research Themes

their motivations, spatial experiences, and expressions of identity within public spaces.

The questionnaire was adapted from previous studies on informal urban practices and street performances (Simpson, 2011; Ho & Au, 2021; Yip & Tran, 2016), aiming to explore the motivation, spatial experience and perception of participants to participate in informal cultural practices. These findings offer a people-oriented perspective on how informal street culture promotes the vitality and inclusiveness of urban public life in Hong Kong. Drawing from the analytical findings, the study applies design-based methods, including spatial modelling, diagramming, and mapping visualisation, to interpret how informal practices could inform future urban design strategies (Corner, 1999; Shelton et al., 2011). This stage transforms empirical research into design knowledge, bridging everyday informality and urban design practice.

4. Findings: Three Ecologies of Informality

Across five study sites—Mong Kok, Tsim Sha Tsui, Central, Fanling and Wong Chuk Hang—the spatial distribution and behavioural patterns of informal cultural activities show a strong correlation with the MTR network. The area near the MTR station has a large flow of people, high visibility and convenient transportation, making it an ideal place for spontaneous cultural expression. Based on field observations of these areas in Hong Kong, this study selected Mong Kok Station, Cameron Road, Lan Kwai Fong, Sheung Shui Garden, and Wong Chuk Hang MTR Station Exit A as research subjects.

4.1 City Centre: Performance and Competition

Mong Kok

Informal cultural performances are most concentrated in the Mong Kok commercial district.

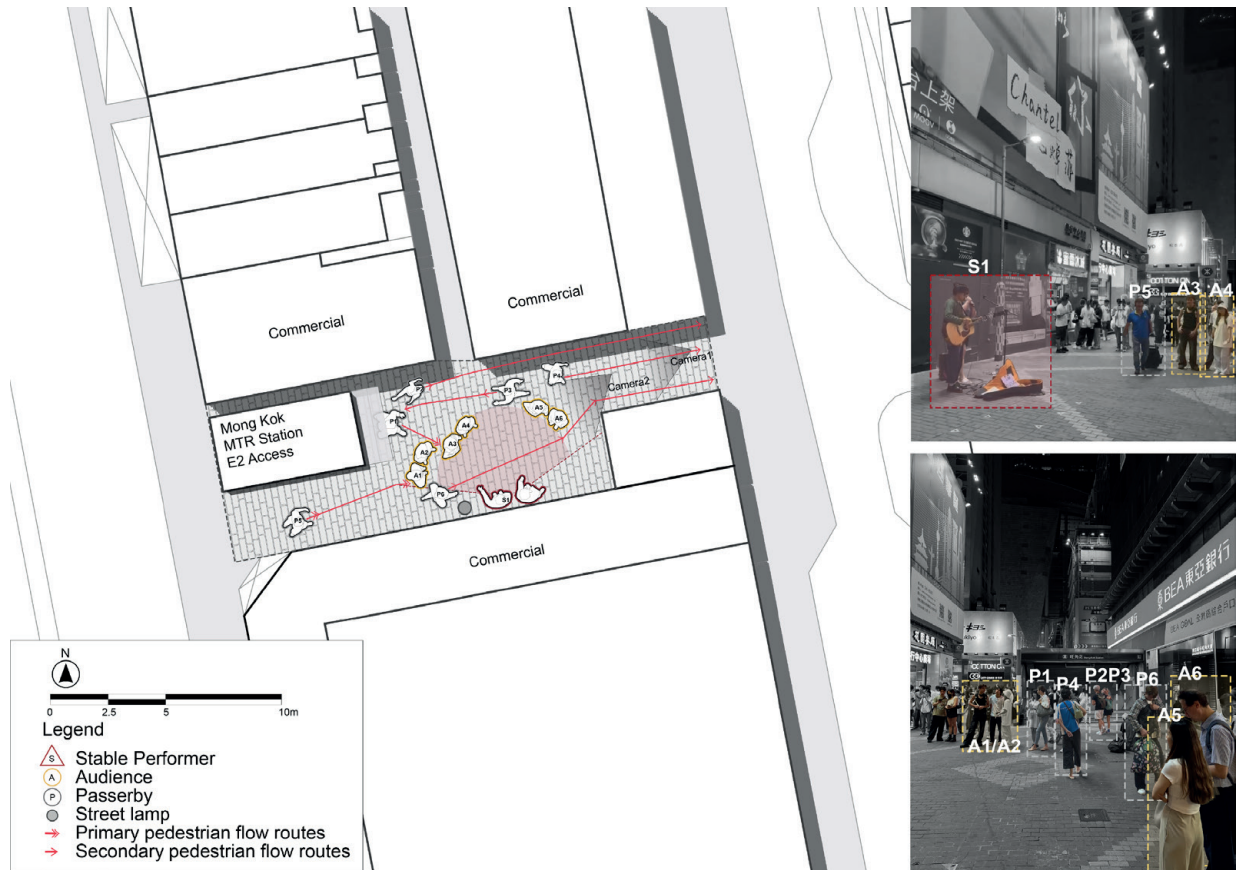


Figure 2. Site-scale Mapping (Zoom-in): Mong Kok Station E2 Access

The study focused on the spontaneous activities around Exit E2 of Mong Kok MTR Station and the adjacent President Commercial Building and found that there was a significant correlation between spatial layout, people flow and performer behaviour.

Most stable performance clusters were around the Mong Kok E2 exit because the large forecourt provided high visibility, stable flows, and

acoustic resonance. A stable performance zone was repeatedly observed at night, where buskers occupied the same site while performers rotated. Audience groups formed semi-circular clusters around the performer, while passersby moved along primary and secondary pedestrian routes. The wide view of the plaza and the endless flow of people provided an ideal performance space, but the space of the performers was limited to a narrow range to avoid obstruct-

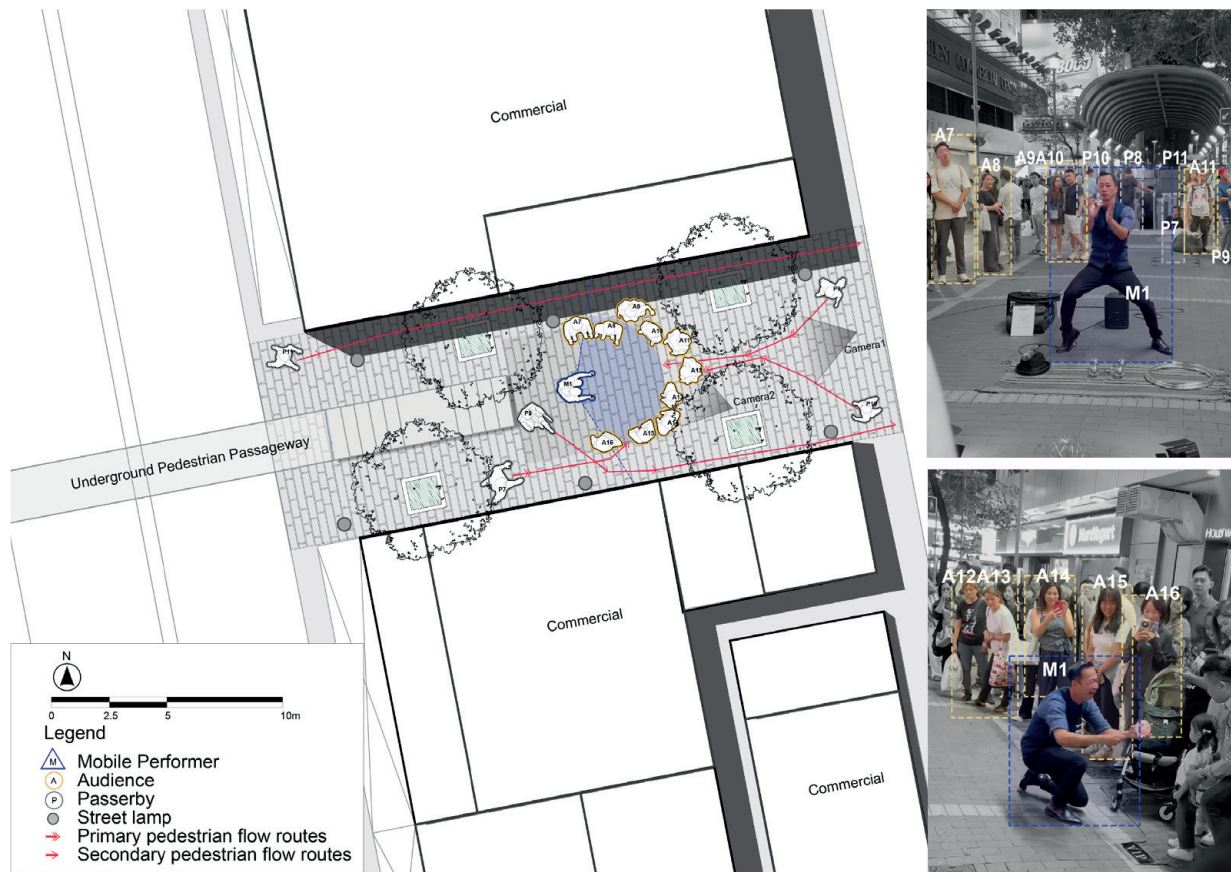


Figure 3. Site-scale Mapping (Zoom-in): President Commercial Building on Nathan Road, Mong Kok

ing the flow of people. The structural enclosure and acoustic benefits made it an ideal performance venue. This pattern illustrates how spontaneous performance coexists harmoniously with urban commercial activities.

The mapping highlights how spatial characteristics affect the venue selection of performers, including ceiling occlusion, marginal conditions and pedestrian passages, and how informal cul-

tural interactions take place in the commercial area. The mapping of the passage next to the Presidential Commercial Building on Nathan Road clearly shows the relationship between spontaneous social behaviour and the spatial characteristics of the urban environment. This passage between the main commercial streets, as a transitional space, although the flow of people is continuous, the speed was slightly slower than that of the main road. In the daytime,

mobile performers moved to a relatively narrow commercial passage along Nathan Road, where the flow of people was intermittent, and temporary performances can be carried out to avoid long-term congestion. The linear layout of the passage, the partially obscured facade, the concave doorway, and the relatively small law enforcement force and other environmental characteristics create some spatial corners that can temporarily support informal performance activities. The spatial adaptability within this mapping highlights how mobile performers can find opportunities in a highly commercialised environment in Mong Kok and choose micro-performance spaces that can avoid direct spatial conflicts. It reveals how the physical form of corridors, pedestrian flow patterns, and regulatory atmospheres collectively foster mobile performance, demonstrating the complex symbiosis between informal cultural practices and the daily urban environment.

Tsim Sha Tsui

Tsim Sha Tsui presents a completely different spatial logic. At the junction of Cameron Road and Carnarvon Road, near the corner of Hang Seng Bank, pedestrian crossings, concave spaces and open views are intertwined, providing intermittent but repeated opportunities for improvisation. At the same time, the covered area under the pedestrian overpass near the Star Ferry provides a fixed venue for regular performers.

At the corner space outside Hang Seng Tsim Sha Tsui Building, which was located at the intersection of Cameron Road and Chatham Road South, two foreign street performers played

percussion with improvised instruments. This shows the flexible use of the sidewalk by street performers, and the audience gathers here for a short time and then continues to walk along the street. The reason why mobile performers choose to perform here is that it has high exposure, good mobility and lower regulatory pressure. The main intersections and roads around the venue provide a good view, and the dense pedestrian flow also creates a sense of tension. The open street corner allows performers to adjust their location in response to crowd density, while multidirectional pedestrian flow increases the likelihood of attracting audiences. The mapping reveals the delicate balance between cultural expression and mobility, and also illustrates how spatial openness, pedestrian dynamics and relatively relaxed regulatory atmosphere interact, thus promoting the emergence of mobile performances.

Central

Central shows a distinctive informal atmosphere, particularly during Halloween. The spatial layout around the hillside of Chater House and the slopes of Lan Kwai Fong reveals how the festive atmosphere temporarily transforms commercial and traffic spaces into highly expressive places. Around Chater House, adjacent to the Central MTR Exit E and connected pedestrian walkways, during Halloween, the streets were crowded with pedestrians dressed in different clothes. They stopped to take photos one after another, and various small performances were staged on the street. Mobile performers were attracted by this area because of the high ex-

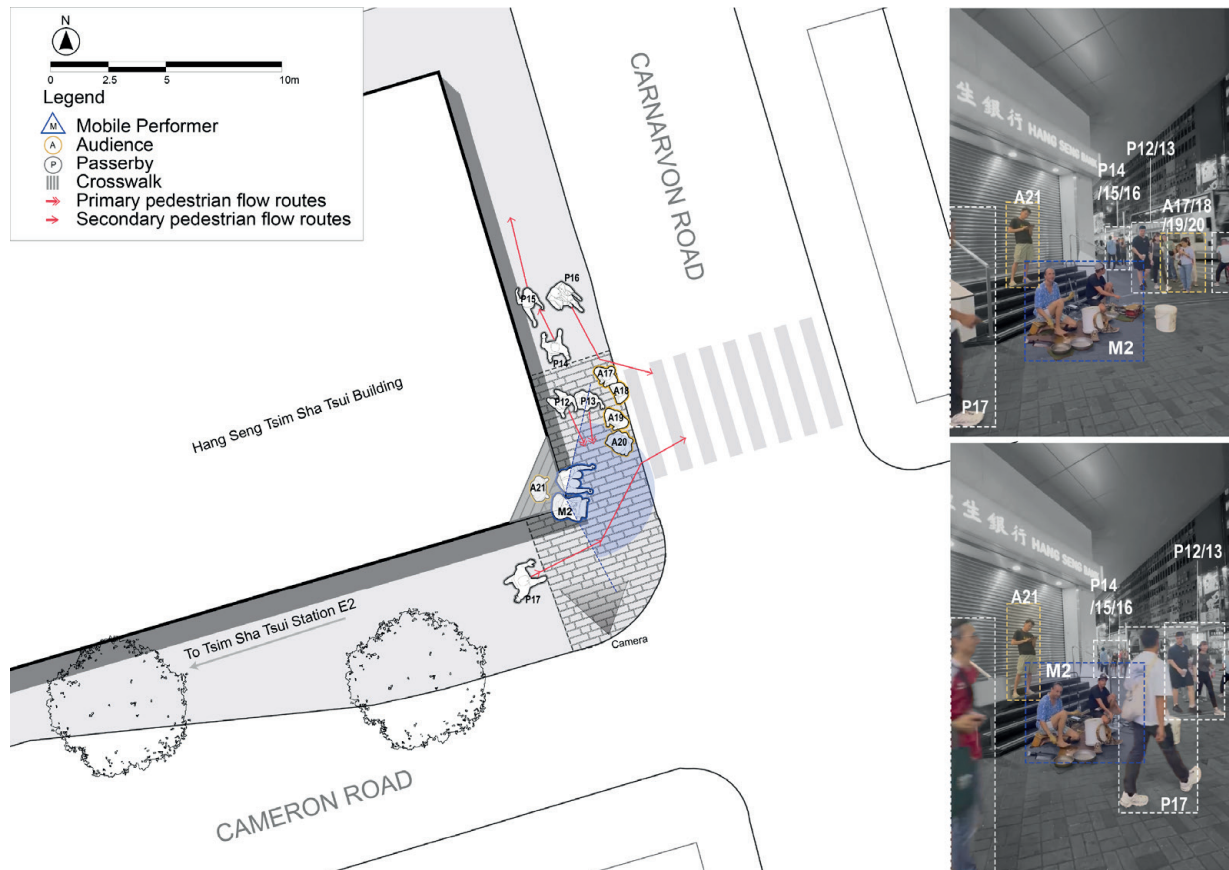


Figure 4. Site-scale Mapping (Zoom-in): Hang Seng Tsim Sha Tsui Building, Cameron Road, Tsim Sha Tsui

posture rate and large space for activities. They used the building facade, light projection and elevated platform as the background to express themselves creatively, while the endless flow of people ensured the high visibility and continuous audience of the performance.

Combined with the concave edge of the building and the elevated sidewalk system, the MTR exit area formed a multi-layered circulation

space, including ground level pedestrian flow, semi-enclosed peripheral zones, and footbridges. This multi-layer structure effectively dispersed the pressure of the crowd and created a space for performers to stay without obstructing the main channel. The combining of Halloween activities shows how the spatial, social and regulatory environment of the Central district gives rise to various occasional informal behaviours. Unlike the more stable and routine performanc-

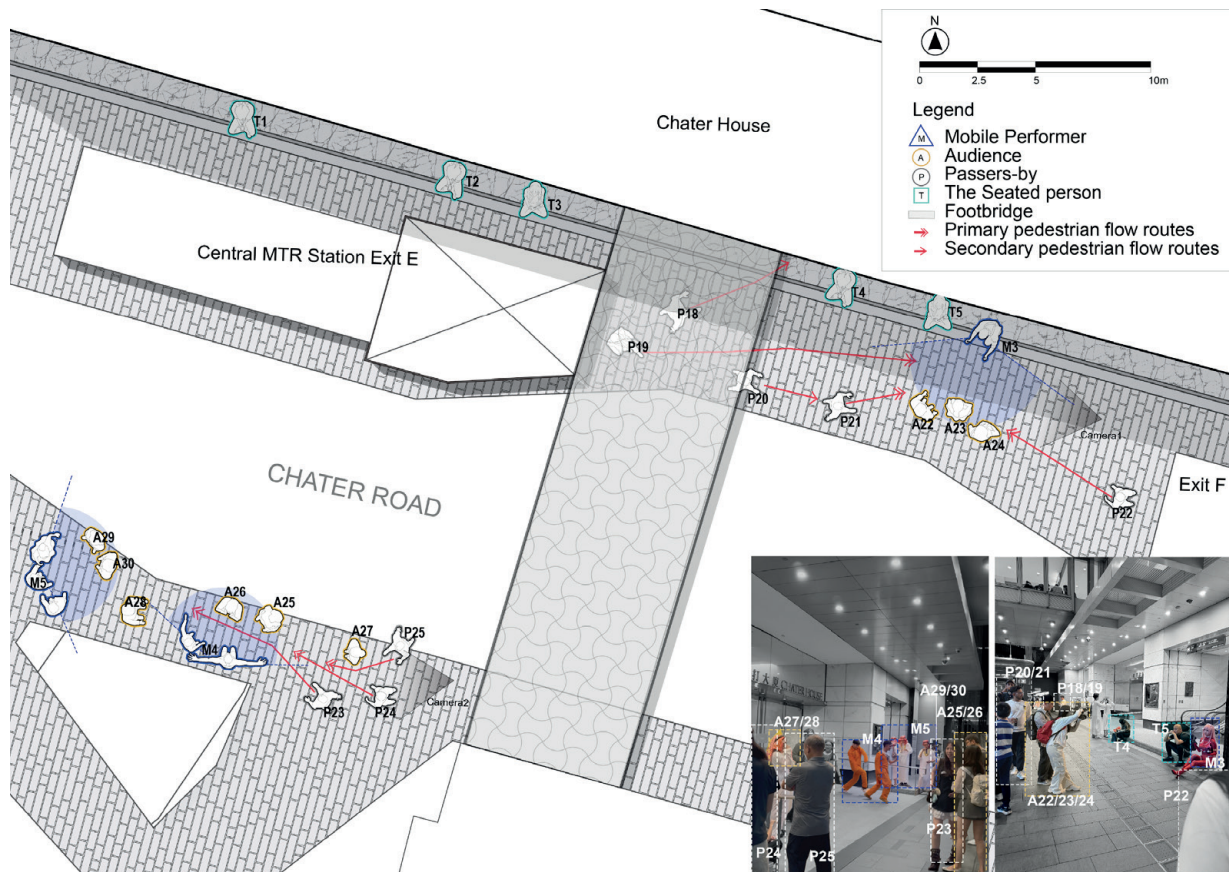


Figure 5. Site-scale Mapping (Zoom-in): Festive processions along Chater House (near Lan Kwai Fong) during Halloween, Central

es observed in Mong Kok, these elements, including temporary regulatory relaxation, dense multidirectional pedestrian flows, and spatial conditions, can temporarily reconfigure commercial districts into stages for impromptu cultural performances, and highlight the interaction between spatial form and public behaviour.

4.2 Fanling New Town: Community and Social Connection

By contrast, the spatial layout of Fanling New Town unfolds at a more measured pace, prioritising community cohesion. Spontaneous gatherings frequently occur in semi-public plazas and open spaces near residential clusters and transport hubs. Such activities typically exhibit

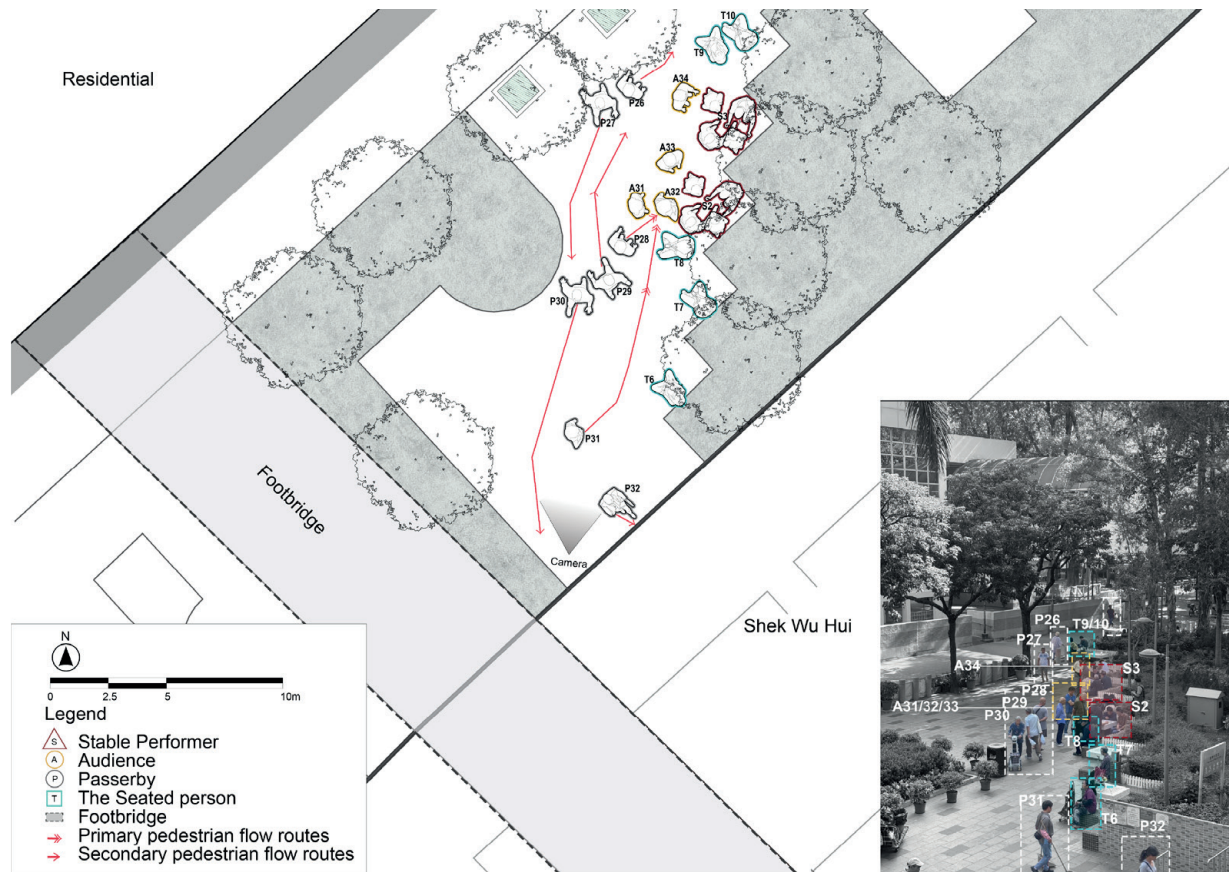


Figure 6. Site-scale Mapping (Zoom-in): Lung Fung Sitting-out Area, Fanling New Town

low mobility yet high social interaction, transforming everyday public spaces into places of belonging and leisure. The plazas' open design and shaded resting areas facilitate residents' spontaneous use of the spaces throughout the day and night.

The elderly groups occupied fixed seats in the shade of the trees in the evening. The comfortable environment and geographical location

were close to the residential area allowing them to socialise, play chess or chat for a long time. The surrounding open paved space is also convenient for passers-by to stop and watch. Compared with commercial districts, the law enforcement here is relatively weak, and residents have a consistent understanding of community norms, so that informal activities can be carried out smoothly.



Figure 7. Site-scale Mapping (Zoom-in): Sheung Shui Garden, Fanling New Town

On Sundays, Filipino domestic workers turned the plaza into a temporary social and cultural gathering place, transforming an ordinary neighbourhood space into a site of collective leisure, emotional support, and cultural expression. Pedestrian flow in this area was slow, and pedestrians kept a low profile, so that the party can coexist harmoniously with the daily flow of people. Passers-by occasionally stopped to observe, especially when domestic workers play

music from their home culture, which demonstrated how the environment invites gentle social overlap rather than conflict. The open and semi-closed square layout created a comfortable micro-environment that supports long-duration occupation. The sunshade structure reduced surveillance from high-rise surroundings and provided climatic protection, enabling domestic workers to sit, dine, and converse for extended periods. By comparison, Sheung Shui

Garden advocates a slower, relational form of informality, contrasting sharply with the commercial-driven, performance-oriented dynamics of commercial districts.

4.3 Wong Chuk Hang: Industrial Looseness and Creative Traces

Although no real-time informal activities were observed during fieldwork in Wong Chuk Hang, the mapping revealed a rich and evolving cultural landscape, which was mainly formed by spontaneous occupation rather than live performance. The industrial area is characterised by large factories, narrow lanes and pedestrian overpasses, creating an environment for informal cultural expression. These traces, including graffiti, industrial art, and advertising posters, reflect a potential but continuous form of cultural production, even without the participation of performers. The architectural form of Wong Chuk Hang significantly influenced these behaviours. The district's wide setbacks, service alleys, and blank industrial facades provided broad surfaces and unclaimed edges ideal for graffiti and poster placement. Compared with commercial areas or new towns, the supervision of the area is relatively weak, creating a relatively relaxed atmosphere, so that artistic creation can be carried out freely without being immediately removed.

5. Comparative Analysis

5.1 Behavioural Typologies

In the three districts, the pattern of informal activities is in sharp contrast. Commercial districts

accommodate high-intensity and performance-driven activities, shaped by dense pedestrian flows, commercial frontage, and open metro exits that offer visibility yet attract regulatory attention. In contrast, Fanling New Town features more prominently social gatherings based on community familiarity and slower spatial rhythm. Wong Chuk Hang is characterised by industrial blocks and flexible edges, which are more conducive to creative expression such as graffiti and informal art traces, rather than performance interaction. These differences reveal how density, spatial affordances, and governance jointly structure the emergence of informal cultural practices.

From the comparison of District × Behaviour Type, different types of informal cultural practices show distinct spatial differences between the three urban areas. In the city centre (Mong Kok, Tsim Sha Tsui and Central), mobile performance and stable busking are the most concentrated. The high pedestrian flow, the density of commercial facades and the vigorous evening activities make this kind of space preferable for cultural activities dominated by visibility, attention and identity expression. These characteristics show that the street culture in the business district is highly immediate and competitive.

In contrast, Fanling New Town more often carries the practices of community gathering and cultural sharing. Whether the Sunday gatherings of domestic workers or the daily activities of local residents in the sitting-out area, they all show the characteristics of slow pace, long stay time, and strong communication within the



Street culture on facade of the industrial building at Exit A2 of Wong Chuk Hang MTR Station, Oct. 8, 2025



Graffiti on facade of Cheung Tak industrial building on Wong Chuk Hang Rd, Oct. 8, 2025



Graffiti on facade of Sing Tek Factory Building on Wong Chuk Hang Rd, Oct. 8, 2025



Graffiti on facade of Vita Building and Coda Designer Centre, Oct. 8, 2025



Figure 8. No real-time activities of Wong Chuk Hang District

Metric	City Centre (MK/TST/Central)	Fanling New Town	Wong Chuk Hang Art District
People density	Very high, tourist-heavy	Moderate, community-based	Low-medium, worker/artist mix
Dominant activities	Busking, mobile shows, seasonal costume display	Family gathering, domestic worker gatherings	Graffiti, small-scale arts traces
Temporal pattern	Night peak	Balanced day & night	Scattered
Spatial setting	MTR exits, retail edges, wide footpaths	Plazas, playgrounds, Community walkways	Industrial building fronts, alleys
Regulatory exposure	High	Medium	Low
Level of freedom	Contested	Socially negotiated	Spatially tolerated

Table 2. Comparative summary of different districts

District	Expressive Acts	Interactive Acts	Collective / Communal	Artistic Occupation	Mobile Performances
Mong Kok	Busking, solo performance	Performer–audience reaction	—	—	Yes (very frequent)
Tsim Sha Tsui	Street art, character posing	Photo interaction	—	—	Yes
Central	Costume / identity display	Group posing, spontaneous interaction	Festive group movement	—	Yes (during event)
Fanling New Town	—	Elderly dance interactions	Domestic worker gatherings	—	—
Wong Chuk Hang	Graffiti expression	—	—	Yes (wall art, posters)	—

Table 3. District × Behaviour Type

group. The motivation of the activity is mainly relaxation, socialisation and sharing cultural experience, and is less affected by the surrounding commercial or regulatory pressure.

In Wong Chuk Hang Industrial Zone, non-instant activities are the main types of behaviour. Such artistic appropriation relies on the interface, back alley and idle corner space of industrial buildings. Unlike the high-density activities in commercial areas, the industrial environment provides more marginal and loosely regulated space, where artistic actions are experimental, expressive and networked. The relationship between Typology and District reveals that the

informal practices of the city centre are biased towards performance and exposure, the Fanling New Town focuses on community interaction and leisure sharing, and the industrial art district reflects the cultural experimental nature brought about by the loosening of space. These three types of spaces are indispensable in the urban cultural structure and constitute the multi-level ecology of Hong Kong's street culture.

5.2 Quantitative Data Integration

The cross-analysis of location preferences and motivations in the questionnaire revealed obvious behavioural tendencies in different types of

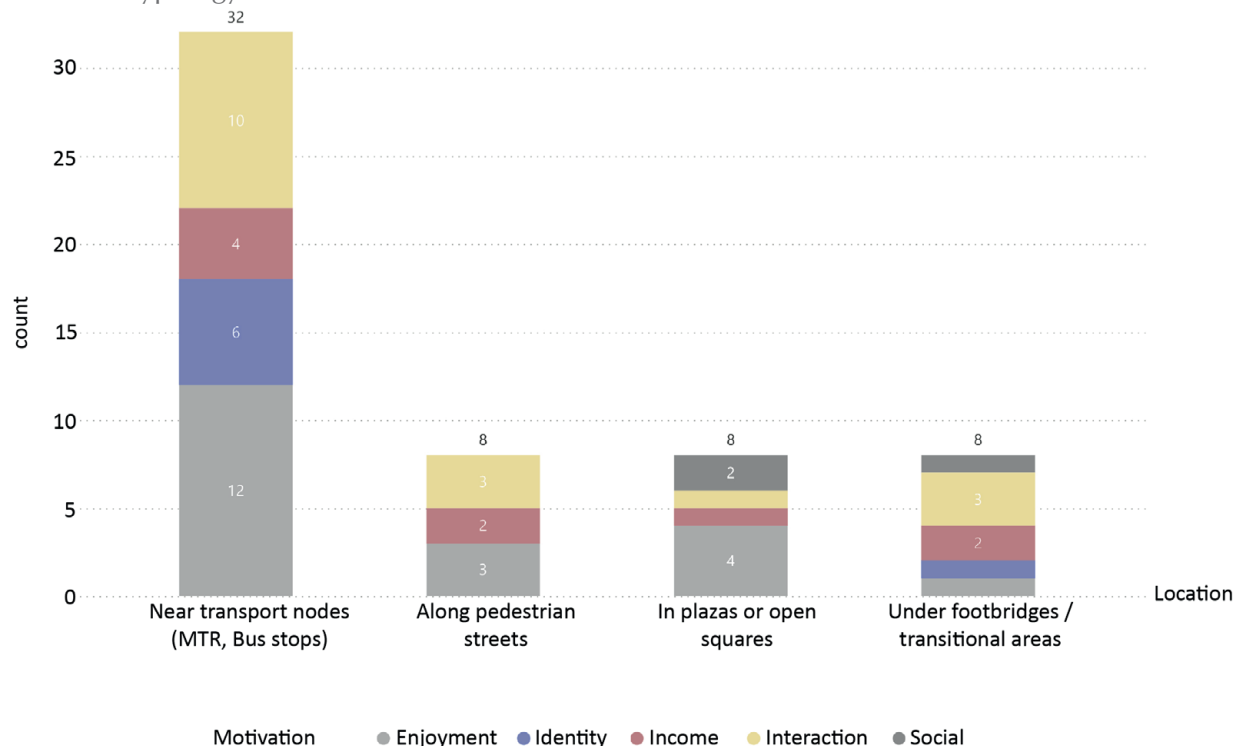


Figure 9. Cross-analysis (Location × Motivation) Column Chart

urban spaces (Figure 9). High-visibility spaces such as MTR exits, major sidewalks and street corners show strong associations with identity expression and gaining recognition. This pattern shows that performers who rely on visibility tend to choose commercial places with large traffic. In contrast, plazas, outdoor rest areas and community open spaces are mainly related to motivations such as enjoyment, cultural exchange and social interaction, which shows that slower-paced environments are more conducive to community-oriented activities. These slower-paced, community-oriented environments appear to encourage forms of participation that prioritise relaxation and interpersonal interaction rather than public appearance.

The SPSS analysis results support the cross-analysis of regions and time periods (day/night), revealing significant differences in time and space in informal cultural activities in Hong Kong (Figure 10). At all monitoring points, night-time activities were significantly more frequent, accounting for 66% of all recorded events, while daytime activities accounted for only 34%. The city centre (Mong Kok, Tsim Sha Tsui and Central) displays the strongest night-time intensification. Tsim Sha Tsui exhibits the strongest concentration, with 84.2% of its recorded activities occurring after dark, followed by Central (76.9%) and Mong Kok (71.4%). This trend corresponds to the vibrant evening economies in commercial districts, extended business hours and increased flows, which provide favourable

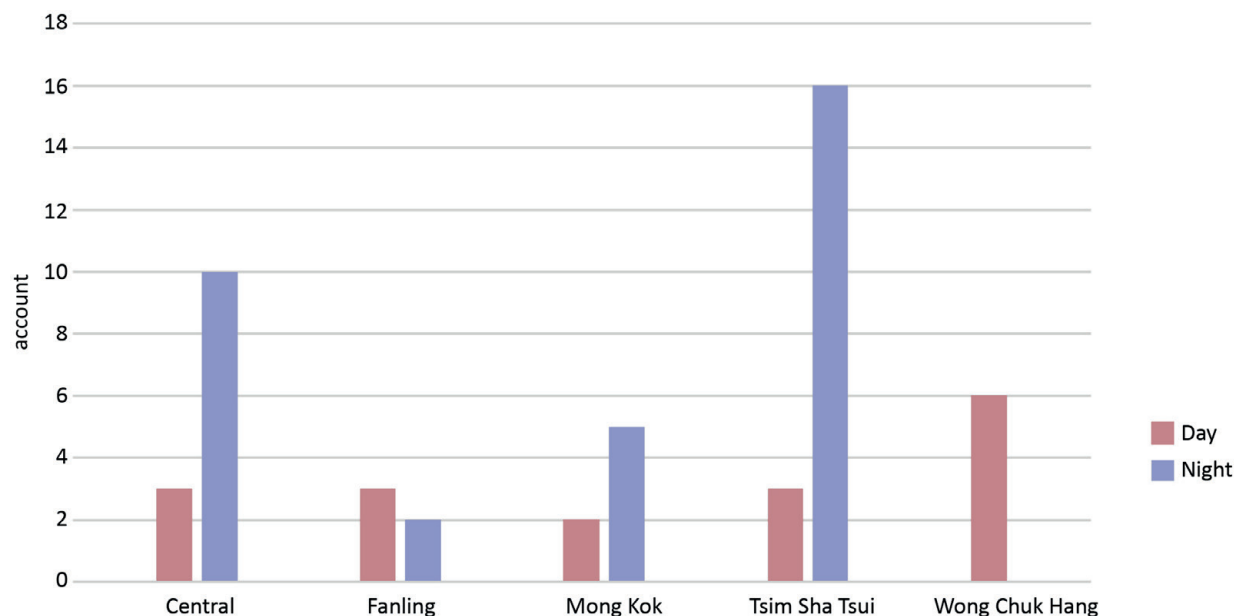


Figure 10. Cross-analysis (Area x Time Period) Column Chart

conditions for street performances, mobile performances and festive gatherings.

However, the time pattern of Fanling New Town is the opposite, with daytime activities accounting for 60% of the total. This reflects the characteristics of the new town paying more attention to the rhythm of community life. Informal activities, such as gatherings of house-keep-

ers, leisure activities in the square, and chess games for elderly residents, are mainly staged in squares and open spaces near residential areas during the day. During the observation period, although Wong Chuk Hang only showed non-immediate activity, there were distinct traces of spontaneous cultural occupation. These imprints signal an accumulating form of informal

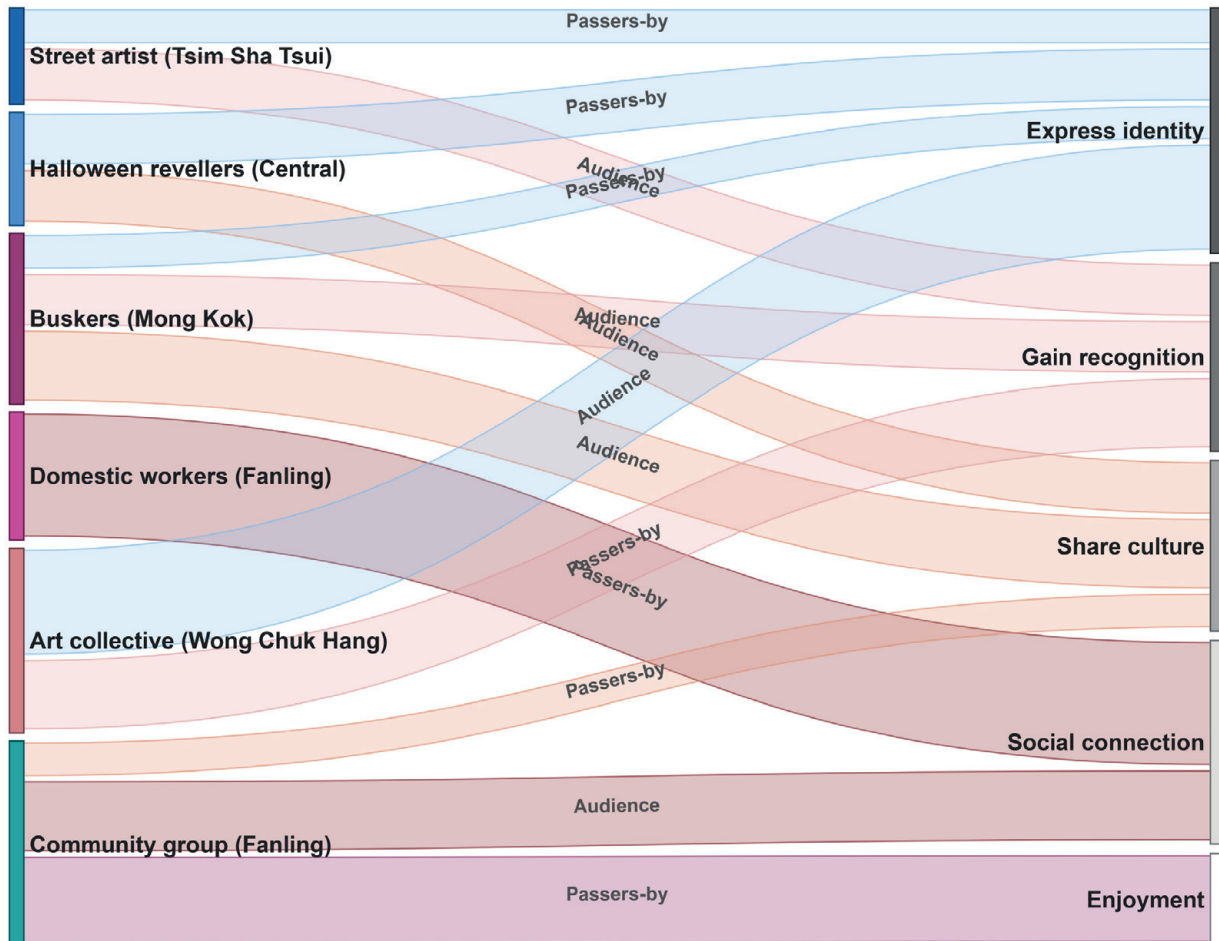


Figure 11. Participants Relationship Sankey diagram

cultural expression, driven by artists and youth subcultures. This reveals a distinctive behavioural-environmental relationship that industrial landscapes are more conducive to a slow and material form of street culture than live performances.

The Sankey diagram visualises the flow of motivation between performers, audiences and passers-by in different urban environments (Figure 11). Each connection line represents how specific motivations drive informal cultural interactions in public spaces, such as cultural sharing, identity expression, recognition or promoting social connection. The visual pattern indicates that buskers and street artists in commercial districts are primarily motivated by cultural sharing and recognition, while domestic workers and community groups in new towns emphasise social connection and collective belonging. These different motivations not only shape the spatial dynamics of participation but also reveal how informal practices promote the inclusiveness and vitality of urban public life.

Street performers in Tsim Sha Tsui showed a clear tendency to seek recognition, reflecting the deep-rooted cultural tension and the visibility of the performance in the business district. In Mong Kok, performers are primarily motivated by a desire to share culture, responding to Nathan Road's competitive atmosphere and high pedestrian flows. The Halloween revellers in Central showed their enthusiasm for collective pursuit of pleasure and creative self-expression, revealing how the festival temporarily reshaped the urban space into an open community ex-

pression platform. In contrast, the participation of community groups in Fanling New Town is chiefly for recreational purposes, highlighting the unique daily social characteristics of the public space of the new town. Domestic workers in Fanling gather weekly at plazas and shelters, motivated by a desire for cultural sharing, emphasising how informal gatherings sustain transnational belonging. Meanwhile, the art group in Wong Chuk Hang are most closely associated with expressing identity, reflecting the area's evolution into an emerging creative collaborative environment. These dynamics together reveal how motivation can be reflected in space through regional differences—and these differences are jointly shaped by the spatial characteristics, population composition and cultural atmosphere of each region.

The spatial perception analysis reveals clear contrasts in how users experience the three urban contexts (City center, Fanling New Town, and Wong Chuk Hang) in seven perceptual dimensions. The city center scored highest in vitality (4.5) and accessibility (4.2), reflecting its dense pedestrian activities, centralised commercial facilities and highly interconnected transportation networks. However, it ranked lowest in comfort (2.8), sense of openness (2.5) and perceived crowding (1.8), indicating that the environmental density fostering cultural vibrancy simultaneously generates feelings of congestion and spatial oppression. This perception model is consistent with field observation that informal activities in the business district are usually carried out in closed spaces and dense pedestrians.

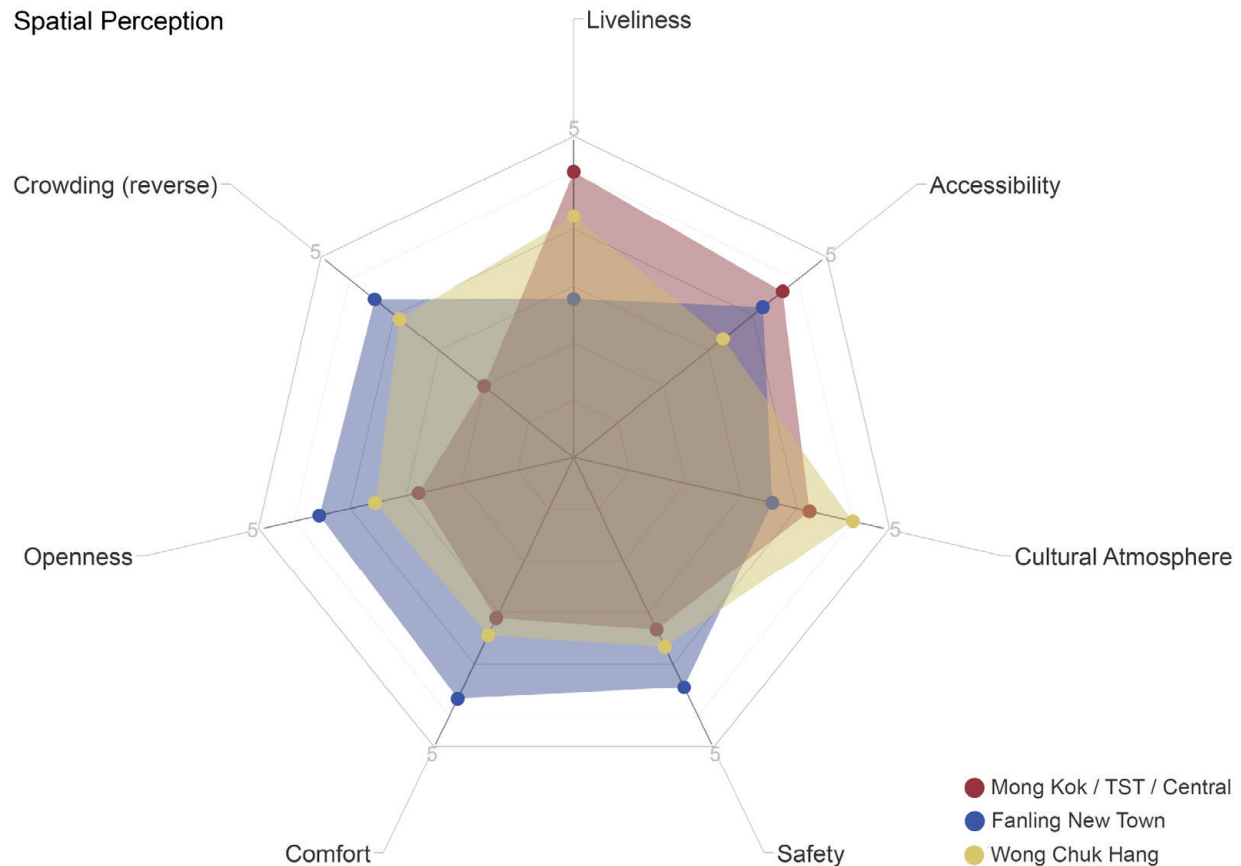


Figure 12. Spatial Perception Radar chart

Fanling New Town shows completely different spatial characteristics, with the highest scores in comfort (4.2), safety (4.0) and openness (4.1). The high comfort and openness scores are due to squares, shaded rest areas and semi-structured public spaces, which support more stable and social informal activities. Wong Chuk Hang exhibits a mixed perception pattern: relatively prominent cultural atmosphere (4.5) and moderate vibrancy (3.8), but comfort (3.1), safety

(3.3) and accessibility (3.0) all rank at medium levels. This is in line with its transformation characteristics as an industrial art district: although there is a creative atmosphere, real-time informal activities are still restricted. The higher cultural atmosphere score comes from the gathering of studios, graffiti and art groups, while the lower accessibility score reflects the restrictions on pedestrian traffic of scattered street networks and industrial complexes. In general, the radar

Typology	Typical Performers	Spatial Characteristics	Motivations	Observed Locations
1. Expressive Performances	Buskers, singers, instrumentalists	High pedestrian volume; MTR exits; commercial thresholds; linear corridors	Gain recognition, financial support, express identity	Mong Kok (Nathan Rd), Tsim Sha Tsui (Carnarvon Rd), Central MTR exits
2. Interactive Artistic Interventions	Street artists, costumed performers, festival actors	Open forecourts, event crowds, pedestrian spill-overs, transitional commercial spaces	Identity expression, creative display, enjoyment	Central (Lan Kwai Fong, Chater House), Tsim Sha Tsui street corners
3. Collective Community Gatherings	Domestic workers, elderly groups, youth music/dance groups	Shaded plazas, sitting-out areas, low enforcement pressure, residential adjacency	Social connection, cultural sharing, relaxation	Fanling (Lung Fung Sitting-out Area), Sheung Shui Garden
4. Spontaneous Play & Everyday Leisure	Youths, children, resting individuals, small peer groups	Edges, steps, sheltered spaces, slow pedestrian flow, leftover industrial spaces	Enjoyment, informal interaction	Fanling, Sheung Shui, Wong Chuk Hang (industrial edges)
5. Artistic Occupation of Industrial Space	Art collectives, graffiti writers	Back alleys, factory facades, loading bays, underused transitional areas	Social connection, identity expression	Wong Chuk Hang

Table 4. Typology of Informal Cultural Practices in Three Urban Contexts

map highlights the differences in spatial perception in different regions: the city centre districts are vibrant but not comfortable; the environment of Fanling New Town is safe and open, but the cultural stimulation is limited; Wong Chuk Hang shows creative characteristics but is still subject to its industrial form. These differences help to explain the distinct patterns of informal cultural activities that have emerged in these three spatial contexts.

Drawing upon Simpson's (2011) research on the performative and socially embedded nature of everyday street practices, and Ho and Au's (2021) analysis of informal urbanism in Hong Kong, this study identifies five recurring typologies of informal cultural activities across the three study areas. These categories were derived through the synthesis of field observations, mapping results and questionnaire surveys (Gehl & Svarre, 2013).

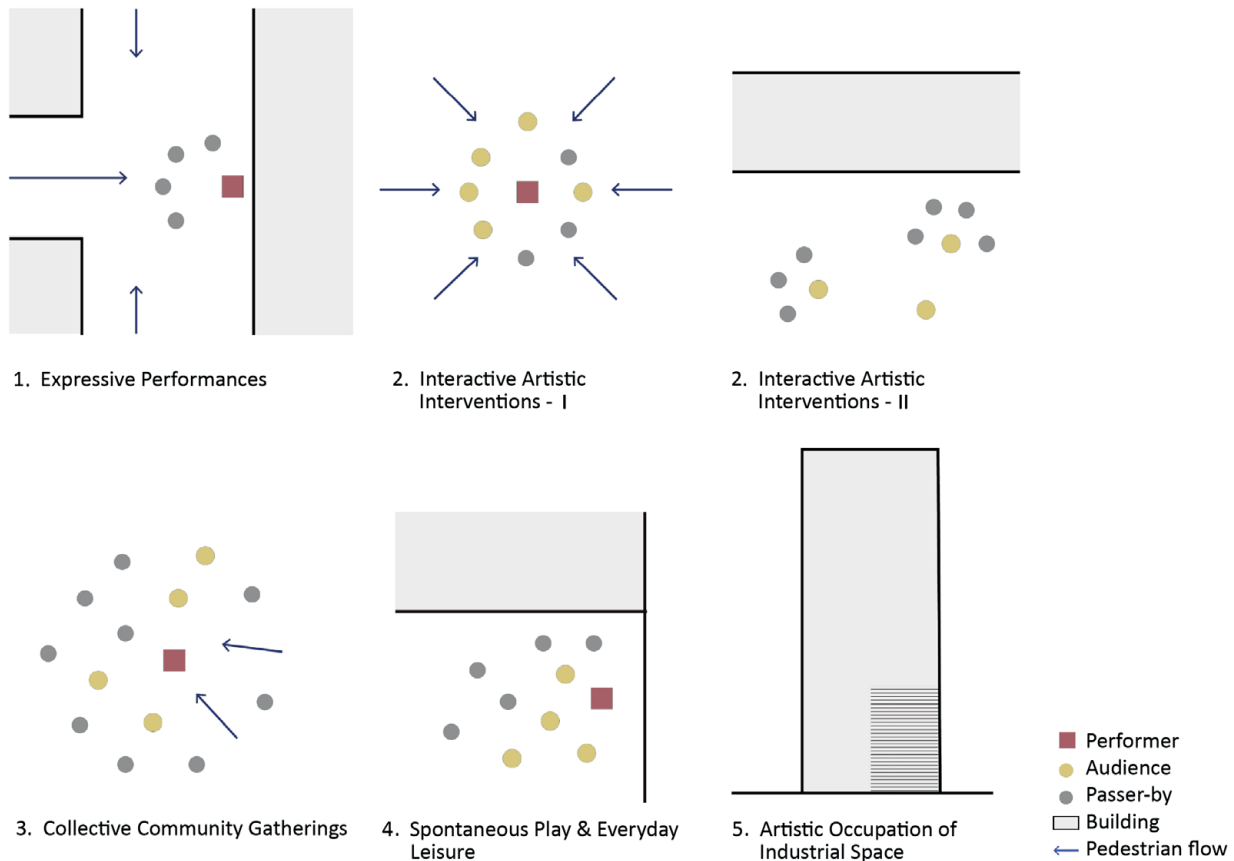


Figure 13. Spatial principle diagrams for five typologies

To facilitate the comparison of the five event typologies, this section introduces a set of simple spatial diagrams that abstract the key spatial logic of each category of behaviour (Dovey, 2016). These diagrams highlight the relationship among different groups, movement flows, spatial capacity, and the level of regulatory oversight (Goffman, 1963; Whyte, 1980).

6. Discussion: Design Implications

6.1 Interplay of Environment, Behaviour, Motivation and Spatial Quality

The synthesis of spatial mapping and survey data reveals that informal cultural practices emerge from a specific feedback loop between the urban environment, behavioural patterns, and participant motivations. The high-density environment and narrow corridors of central

districts dictate a mobile and opportunistic behavioural pattern (Carmona et al., 2003). Performers occupy transitional edges (e.g. street corners and corridors) to minimise spatial conflict while maximising exposure. These practices driven by motivation for recognition and visibility reflect a high-pressure environment perceived as vibrant yet physically restrictive, requiring constant negotiation with commercial regulation.

In Fanling New Town, open plazas and residential proximity foster socially cohesive, slow-paced patterns. Recurring gatherings by domestic workers and the elderly demonstrate how users adapt flexible spaces for communal connection and cultural exchange. High scores in comfort and belonging confirm that low-density activity spaces effectively support sustained social interaction rather than performance-oriented competition.

Although Wong Chuk Hang did not exhibit immediate informal activities during fieldwork, the industrial fabric offers spatial looseness that invites creative appropriation rather than live performance. Traces of graffiti and art reveal motivations centred on experimentation and identity articulation. While perceived comfort is low, the high sense of art freedom highlights the industrial zone's unique role as an incubator for unregulated, experimental cultural expression. These comparisons illustrate that Hong Kong's informal street culture is a distinctive spatial product shaped by the friction between environmental constraints and user motivations.

6.2 From Efficiency to Redundancy: Recognise Cultural Opportunity Zones

Modern urban planning often follows logic of optimization, pursuing maximum functional efficiency at minimum cost. Under this concept, pavements are designed for bare passage, while footbridges are reduced to the narrowest possible width. However, the comparative analysis of this study reveals how such a singularly dimensioned efficiency perspective weakens urban public life. In Mong Kok and Central, although the highly optimised commercial spaces have achieved maximising passage efficiency, due to the lack of buffer zones, street performers can only survive in gaps, which frequently trigger conflicts about blocking streets and noise. This excessive functional design eliminates the flexibility of space.

In contrast, Fanling New Town, which was built in the 1980s, showed a valuable 'Spatial Redundancy'. For example, the squares of Sheung Shui Garden and Luen Wu Market, which seem to be inefficient or overly spacious, provide a physical basis for the long stay of the elderly and weekend gatherings of domestic workers because of their looseness. Also, the setbacks and idle interfaces of Wong Chuk Hang Industrial Zone have become the canvases of graffiti and improvisation because they are not completely filled with commercial logic. This resonates with the concept of 'public-space heterotopias' (Allweil & Kallus, 2008), which argued that spaces of difference are often cultivated in areas of urban neglect or spatial ambiguity. Similarly, in Fanling and Wong Chuk Hang, it

is the lack of rigorous commercial optimization that allows these redundancy spaces to flourish in community life, creating a key point against the efficiency policy. Therefore, urban design should not only pursue the extreme of efficiency. Retaining a certain degree of redundancy is not a waste, but a necessary margin reserved for unplanned social interaction and cultural growth (Carr et al., 1992).

6.3 The Politics of Rotation at Micro-scale

Macro-scale regional analysis often conceals the complex power dynamics of public space on a microscale (50-100 metres). This study shows that the ownership of public spaces is not fixed, but continuous 'Politics of Rotation' between different users. At Exit E2 of Mong Kok MTR Station, this rotation is a kind of high-frequency and competitive negotiation. Performers, passers-by and supervisors are constantly fighting for control in a limited time and space, and this right changes rapidly with the passage of time. However, in a more stable community environment, this rotation presents a legitimacy based on habituation. From the field observations, domestic workers in Fanling occupy the bottom of the overpass and the plaza every Sunday. This long-term and regular occupation has made the informal behaviour accepted by the community and even become a part of the local landscape. Just like some stable street performers, even if their performance form may not meet everyone's aesthetics, this persistence reshapes the ownership of space and transforms public space from a single pass function into a place to carry collective memory. This phe-

nomenon indicates that the micro-scale space rights not only come from the legal provisions, but also from the factual contract established by the daily users.

6.4 Street Culture as a Pathway in Societal Progress

The value of informal cultural practice transcends the vitality of space itself, and it constitutes an important path to social inclusion and progress. At the same time, public space often provides a precious field that can see and be seen across socio-economic status. The activities of domestic workers in the public space of Fanling New Town provide strong support. In weekdays, they are often hidden under the single identity of 'employees'. However, when they played music, danced or shared their hometown delicacies in public squares on Sundays, they restructured themselves in the public vision, from providers of labour to creators of culture (Law, 2002). Therefore, inclusive informal street culture is not only the tolerance of urban management, but also the cornerstone of building a multicultural society.

7. Conclusion

This study challenges a uniform definition of 'urban vitality', arguing that urban vitality in Hong Kong manifests in three distinct ecological modes shaped by the interaction between spatial density and governance (Montgomery, 1998). In Hong Kong, vitality is a multi-level and geographical concept co-shaped by density, regulation and spatial affordance (Ye et al., 2018).

This study extends the discourse on 'public-space heterotopias' (Allweil & Kallus, 2008) within the high-density city context. Modern urban planning in Hong Kong often prioritises efficiency, flow maximisation, and economic optimisation. However, this study demonstrates that informal practices and cultural resilience rely on spatial redundancy (Roggema, 2016). A lack of tight optimisation allows room for marginalised behaviours, such as the Sunday gatherings of domestic workers. These practices are not a defect of urban management, but a crucial indicator of social resilience and the coexistence of different groups.

This study links informal activities with user motivation (e.g. identity expression, social connection, and cultural sharing). Informal activity is an adaptive strategy for different groups to fight for spatial justice and reshape public nature (Soja, 2010). It is an important source of cultural expression and sense of belonging, especially for marginalised groups such as domestic workers and street performers.

This study suggests that urban design and policy in Hong Kong must shift from the paradigm of control and efficiency to planning and redundancy. In a high-dense metropolis like Hong Kong, informal cultural practices are the vital pulse of urban resilience. These strategies represent the ways citizens fight for urban rights in their daily life, from street performers seeking recognition to domestic workers seeking a sense of belonging (Harvey, 2008). By advocating space redundancy and protecting marginalised groups from excessive regulation, Hong

Kong can ensure that its public spaces remain vibrant and become a place of democratic and cultural production that includes all parties, not just a channel for transportation and consumption.

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