

## Hiding and Living — A Day in a Service Lane: Exhibiting Invisibility

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### Abstract

A metropolis always appears to be a competitive place, with people vying for attention everywhere. But behind this bustling scene, there are some people who try to survive by keeping a low profile; while marginalised individuals are surviving in marginal spaces within the city, there is a paucity of research investigating the production and use of differential spaces within Asian metropolises. The research presented in this paper focuses on the users of Hong Kong's service lanes, exploring the subtle transformation between the visibility and invisibility of space, and the disappearance and reappearance of daily life, and further illuminates how this transformation provides living space for marginalised people in the city. The paper, documenting an exhibition titled "A Day in a Service Lane", delves into the display of photographs reporting the changing patterns of use of the service lane in an informal exhibition space within a service lane and discusses the fortuitous encounters and visitors' reactions to such an experiment. This research aims to highlight the urgency of considering the needs of marginalised individuals and the use of inconspicuous spaces for a more inclusive and spatially just metropolis.

### Keywords

back alley, invisibility, informal

It was a hot afternoon. I took out a stack of freshly printed materials from a woven sack and spread them on the ground. I searched and sorted them, trying to find a faster way to finish the work and escape from this hot and humid environment. Footsteps approached, and then suddenly stopped beside me. I thought it was a passer-by who was curious about my behaviour, so I looked up and greeted him, but I saw two men in uniform staring at me. It's the police.

"What are you doing here?"

"What are you doing here?" the same question was asked by the owner of a fish stall at the entrance of a back alley a few months ago, with the same serious expression as those two policemen. He imitated my movement of holding a camera with one hand and gestured back and forth with the other hand, indicating that he had seen me walking back and forth here several times. Yes, this is my research. I chose four days, including weekdays and weekends, and walked through the back alleys in Mong Kok repeatedly at different times of the day with a camera, recording what happened at these moments. I hoped I could find something interesting, but apparently, by the next day I had become the most interesting thing in these alleys.

I picked up some photos on the ground and handed them to the police, "I'm holding an exhibition." Looking around at the open-air yet cramped environment, I couldn't say for sure that it was an exhibition. My understanding of

"exhibition" was very limited. I come from a small city with relatively backward economy, where people care more about practical things than art. When I was a child, the exhibitions were all held by the government to highlight the important details that are easy to overlook, such as running a red light – they posted photos of the accident scenes and told you that if you run a red light, you would be the next one posted. Looking at the photos in my hands, I thought I definitely inherited something from my childhood experiences, but not entirely, I also incorporated what I learned at a real art exhibition. It was about a year ago, I was sitting in the spacious and clean exhibition hall of M+, a famous museum in Hong Kong. The screen opposite me was playing a video, teaching me how to become invisible. The video raised an interesting point, saying that with the clarity of modern satellite images, it is theoretically impossible to hide on Earth, but there are still many ways to achieve invisibility. I forget what all those exact approaches are, but I'm sure that this is the moment when I heard the most politically incorrect words. All those approaches can be attributed to the same logic: as long as you are insignificant, as long as no one cares about you, you can become invisible from the world, easily.

"It's difficult to take Hong Kong as the research object", this is the reminder I got in the meeting for thesis topic selection, "Hong Kong is small, and there are many scholars. They've been studying every corner of this city." It sounds reasonable. But, is there any space which can hide

from people's eyes? I guess there is, there must be, as long as it is not important enough.

"I'm a master student, I'm doing research." I answered the fish stall owner, and he immediately turned his head away and ignored me. I admit that it was a very embarrassing moment, the smile was still on my face, but in the eyes of the stall owner I was nothing but air. The good thing is that I gained the superpower of invisibility, accidentally. After I became invisible, change happened in back alleys, not because something interesting appeared but because overlooked details came to the fore. I found that my camera captured some familiar faces. They repeated the same things every day in a fixed place and at a fixed time. Someone processed fresh meat for sale every morning; someone used rainwater collected in buckets to wet cardboard boxes every noon; someone ate food at the back door of the shop every afternoon; someone set up a stall at alley entrance to tell fortunes every evening... Due to the actions of these people, the space also appeared and disappeared, with workbenches set up and put away, foam boxes piled up and moved away, tables and chairs that only placed during business hours, and goods hung on the closed shutter doors... It turns out that this dark and narrow space is where some people live, so the space itself seems to be alive with a breathing rhythm.

One of the policemen took my photos, the top one showing a craftsman sawing a board. I

didn't know if he really understood the content of my exhibition, but he obviously lost interest after checking a few photos. He turned his head and pointed to a painting on the wall — a little ghost making a face — and asked, "Is this yours too?"

"No."

"Most are done by many artists that we invited for different projects", Alberto said to me, facing a painting on the wall, "We work just like a museum. But the shape of our museum is a line, so it's a minus. Ours is a M-...We try to cut out all of the things that are not supposed to be in a museum." Alberto is the first "informal user" of the back alleys whom I interviewed. He built an open-air museum in a back alley in Sham Shui Po and named it "Thy lane". And its Chinese name "昊里" looks like a person opening his arms to embrace the sunlight. Thy lane is completely open to the public, just like the sun shining on everyone. "We want to say art is not just where establish institutions will show you that art is, art can be anywhere."

"But building a museum in the back alley is an unusual thing. Have you ever encountered any obstruction from the government?"

"A few times the police come and say, what are you doing in the lane? And we say we are showing some art. The legal is that every wall belonged to the single landlord. So I can do whatever on the wall if the landlords agree... But the floor is from the government. So I don't touch the floor."

But the landlord may have a different understanding of the wall. One restaurant completely removed its back wall and extended the awning above to the wall across the alley. The boundary between public and private became blurred. Every night, the space under the awning was bustling with people, with several tables lined up along the alley. I counted that it could accommodate about 20 guests dining here. I chose a relatively quiet time to step into this invisible wall, trying to get a taste of the secret of its booming business. “This is the smoking area”, a waiter immediately came over and led me through the kitchen to the normal dining area inside — the dining hall next to the front door. It seemed that I entered in the wrong way.

“So the room near the alley is the smoking area.”

“Yes, some guests smoke there, so I don’t recommend you sit there.”

“I see that room opens directly to the alley. Do you also use the space in the alley?”

“No, no, we never occupied there.”

The waiter’s expression suddenly showed a hint of fear. I realized that my invisibility superpower had failed. Of course, that frightened expression meant that this space was also visible at some point.

“There are penalties.” A craftsman who was processing an awning in the alley told me that from time to time, officials would come here to warn him that his behaviour was illegal, and

if he continued to stay here after receiving the warning, he would be fined. But renting a house was too expensive for him, and the money he earned could not cover the rent.

“You mean you’ve been here for so long because the fines are cheaper than the rent?”

“So to speak.”

“This stall has been here since the 1940s”, a vendor told me, sitting in a narrow shed that was only about half a meter wide. These fixed stalls occupying one side of the alley entrance can be found everywhere in Mong Kok, so in my initial investigation I assumed that they were running a legal business.

“I can’t believe that your business is illegal.”

“Many people around here are doing business illegally.”

The vendor told me that the stall was inherited by his wife from her grandmother, but due to policy changes, he is now unable to inherit the hawker licence.

“Can your income cover your living expenses?”

“No, but I still have some savings to support me.”

“Are there other options besides keeping paying the fines? Such as a relatively cheap legal stall.”

“Yes, but I don’t want to move away, because this stall has other meanings for me.”



"I feel free here." An interviewee, who was sitting only a dozen meters away from the back entrance of a park, told me that he would be fined if he smoked in the park, but sitting in the alley is a good alternative.

"Acquaintances nearby can gather here to smoke and chat, the air is flowing, and no one will mind you."

After checking my ID card, the police decided to leave me alone. The sky gradually darkened, and as the photos appeared on the wall one by one, my figure began to fade away. I clearly underestimated the difficulty of this "informal" exhibition. The exhibition featured five groups of informal users of the back alleys, including scavengers, craftsmen, vendors, shop keepers, and people resting in the back alleys. Each group featured three scenes, and each scene had four time periods: morning, noon, afternoon, and evening. I wanted to tell the story of a day in the back alley by inserting time into 15 scenes in a way similar to movie clips, which brought a huge amount of work. It was already dark when I pasted the last one. I used the light from the alley entrance to tear off the cover of the double-sided tape. It's the introduction to the exhibition. I made it into a movie poster and added Wong Kar Wai style tones, hoping to present the neglected daily life in a more local way. Next to the poster is a road sign pasted by another "curator" who also hopes to showcase neglected local art — "Thy lane 吴里".

Opening at such an awkward time resulted in

no one paying attention to my exhibition that evening, and I had to call my classmates to support me.

"It's so dark here, I'm afraid to go in..."

"Will a mouse suddenly run out?"

"Be careful! There's a cockroach!"

I completed my debut with my trembling classmates. I found that the reason why invisible space is invisible is because it has an invisible "field", just like the gravitational field and magnetic field in physics, but this "field" is not truly insignificant, it is real and perceptible, in a terrifying way. As someone who is used to being invisible, I can easily step into this "field", but others cannot. The night has become a kind of protective colour. Everyone wants to live in the light, but being illuminated is sometimes an ideal that requires tactically walking through the back alleys of the law to achieve.



Figure 1. My poster and road sign "Thy Lane"





Figure 2. The panorama of the exhibition





Figure 3. My classmates had to use flashlights to view the exhibition on the opening night





Figure 4. My photos and the painting of a little ghost making a face





Figure 5. Three scenes about a day of shopkeepers who use back alleys.  
(From left to right: morning, noon, afternoon, evening. The last row is the restaurant with an invisible back wall)





Figure 6. Three scenes about a day of people resting in back alleys.  
(The second row is the “rest area” near the back entrance of the park.)



## Postscript

This article introduces an exhibition about back-alley life held in the back alley, which titled “A Day in a Service Lane”. Service lane is the official name for the back alley in Hong Kong regulations (Hong Kong Government, 1956). They were named Scavenging Lane (Hong Kong Government, 1903) to improve the crowded living environment and poor hygiene in the Chinese residential areas (Welsh, 1997). Today, these back alleys still undertake important functions such as garbage collection, facility maintenance, ventilation, and fire prevention. But there are many people in the back alleys who engage in activities unrelated to these functions, and I call them “informal users”. They are reshaping the public space of the back alley with their personal understanding. My exhibition was held in a back alley without any official permission, so it was an informal practice to present the research of informal activities. This is a nesting of roles, where I, as an informal user observer, become a member of the informal users. Therefore, in this article I choose to start from my personal perspective, taking my own experiences as the main thread, and connecting the stories of other informal users. I hope that in this way, the article can visually reflect the difficulties faced by those who have to live in the back alleys.

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