Spatial practice, conceived space and lived space: Hong Kong’s ‘Piers saga’ through the Lefebvrian lens

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By applying the Lefebvrian lens, this paper tries to understand why unlike previous similar cases, the latest removal of the Star Ferry and Queen’s Pier was so controversial. To Lefebvre, embedded in ‘spatial practices’ that ‘secrete’ a place are two contradicting spaces: ‘conceived spaces’ produced by planners to create exchange values and ‘lived spaces’ appropriated by citizens for use values. Applying Lefebvre’s framework to examine the ‘Piers saga’, it is found that the pre-Second World War (WWII) piers were ‘conceived’ by spatial practices of a colonial and racially segregated trading enclave. The public space in the commercial heart that housed the previous generations of piers was not accessible to the Chinese community, thus denying them opportunities to appropriate them and turn them into ‘lived’ spaces. It was only after WWII when the Government carried out further reclamation to meet the needs of an industrializing economy that inclusive public spaces were conceived in the commercial heart, enabling the general public to ‘appropriate’ them as ‘lived’ space. When the Government planned to remove this very first ‘lived’ space in the political and economic heart of the city to conceive further reclamation for the restructuring economy, the more enlightened citizens were determined to defend it.

Keywords: Lefebvre; Hong Kong; colonial spatial planning practice; harbour reclamation; urban planning and civil society

Introduction

Reclamation, as a spatial practice, has been the single most important source of land production in the central business district of Hong Kong (see Figure 1). Four successive phases of reclamation in the Central District (1841–2009) have resulted in the relocation of various piers, prominent features of Victoria Harbour since the colonial days. The current phase of the Central harbour reclamation resulted in the demolition of the 1957 Star Ferry Pier (voted as one of the 50 ‘must see’ sites in the world by the National Geographic) in 2006. A replacement pier (fourth generation) was constructed on the new harbourfront. Queen’s Pier, neighbouring the 1957 Star Ferry Pier, itself a replacement of an older pier built in 1925, was ‘dismantled and removed’ on 1 August 2007 and will be ‘reinstated’ when reclamation is completed at the new Central harbourfront. Hong Kong has clearly demonstrated the power of a capitalist economy: ‘all that is solid melts in the air’.1 However, unlike previous removals and relocations which had been uneventful, the recent demolition of the Star Ferry Pier and Queen’s Pier was met by strong civic resistance organized by various social and cultural groups. To those who

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Figure 1. Phases of reclamation in the Central District of Hong Kong.
fought for the conservation of the Star Ferry and Queen’s Pier, the Government’s ‘conceived’ reclamation plan is wiping out their memorable ‘lived’ spaces of collective memory to make room for more road infrastructure and shopping malls, just as Cuthbert expressed, ‘for a fistful of dollars’. This paper attempts to review the ‘migration’ history of the Star Ferry Pier and Queen’s Pier through the lens of Lefebvre’s spatial trialectics in order to understand the rise of this ongoing ‘battle of space’. The following paragraphs first review and explain Lefebvre’s triadic spatial framework. Then, the history of the relocation of the Star Ferry Pier and Queen’s Pier is discussed against the evolving spatial practices, and ‘conceived’ and ‘lived’ spaces in the Central District. The paper concludes with some insights on the use of Lefebvre’s triadic spatial frameworks for understanding the ‘Piers saga’ of Hong Kong.

**Lefebvre’s spatial triad**

To Lefebvre, we are ‘confronted by an indefinite multitude of space, each one piled upon, or perhaps contained within, the next: geographical, economic, demographic, sociological, ecological, political, commercial, national, continental, global’. However, he laments that the ‘ideologically dominant tendency’ is to ‘divide space up into parts and parcels in accordance with the social division of labour’, thus obscuring a perceptive understanding of the processes involved in the production of space and the embedded social relationships. The direct result is a general inability to appreciate a spatial unity that ‘transpires between levels … the forces of production and their component elements (nature, labour, technology, knowledge); structures (property relations); superstructure (institutions and the state itself)’. This inability to appreciate the unity of space explains why we tend to fail to notice the contradictory and opposing social relationships that are latent in spaces. To Lefebvre, this inability to appreciate the unity of space is maintained by the hegemony of the ruling class through different means, including knowledge. Hence, he distinguishes between two types of knowledge: knowledge that serves power (savoir) and knowledge that refuses to acknowledge power (connaissance), a critical and subversive form of knowledge that allows us to develop a more critical understanding of space, especially space produced to serve power in an evolving mode of production. Lefebvre’s project is to bring ‘the various kinds of space and the modalities of their genesis together within a single theory’ through the construction of a rather complex heuristic tool, a ‘spatial triad’ for understanding the production of space. The three trialectically related concepts in the production of space are spatial practice (perceived space: le perçu), representations of space (conceived space: le conçu) and representational space (lived space: le vécu).

‘Spatial practice of a society secretes that society’s space.’ Spatial practices give structure to everyday activities within the wider socio-economic context. It ensures continuity and a certain degree of cohesion for a ‘guaranteed level of competence and a specific level of performance’ of every society member’s social relationship in space. To Lefebvre, spatial practice can be likened to ‘perceived spaces’ – it is revealed through the deciphering and decoding of its space. *Conceived space (representations of space)* is tied ‘to the relations of production and the “order” [of the market and of the state] which those relations impose’ and is ‘the space of scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers … all of whom identify what is “lived” and what is “perceived” with what is “conceived”’. This is the dominant space in any society (or mode of production). Contrary to the dominant...
space is the *lived space (representational space)*, the space of the everyday, the dominated and hence passively experienced space which the imagination of its ‘inhabitants’ and ‘users’ seeks to appropriate and change.

Ideally, ‘spatial practice is lived directly before it is conceptualised [conceived]’.17 In other words, spatial codes that planners use to generate conceived spaces should be distilled from life stories and messages of people’s lived experiences.18 It could be the result of long-term appropriation of nuanced spatial contexts, to be understood through the rhythms of life and time when their spontaneity ‘effectively translates the social order into territorial reality’.19 However, in reality, ‘the speculative primacy of the conceived [space] over the lived [space] causes [spatial] practice to disappear along with life, and so does little justice to the “unconscious” level of lived experience per se’.20 ‘What is lived and perceived is of secondary importance compared to what is conceived’.21 Lefebvre even argues that ‘constraints and violence are encountered at every turn’ in the dominated space, a result of the employment of knowledge that serves the dictates of power, an invention of a concept that ‘rules our society’.22 How does this happen?

Lefebvre argues that since the second half of the twentieth century, the state has been planning and organizing society ‘rationally’, ‘with the help of knowledge and technology’, besides flattening ‘the social and cultural spheres’ and enforcing ‘a logic that puts an end to conflicts and contradictions’.23 The goal, it seems, is to endow the entirety of space ‘with exchange values’.24 To Lefebvre, the expert architects and planners who produce the conceived space are combining ideology and technical knowledge within a socio-spatial practice to serve power in a particular mode of production.25 The seemingly ‘objective’ and ‘neutral’ plans (conceived spaces) serve simply as ‘a tool of thought and of action’, ‘a means of production’ and ‘a means of control, of domination, of power’.26 As a result, the lived spaces, spaces wherever concrete daily activity takes place, are boxed in, disrupted, forgotten, if not fragmented and destroyed. Lefebvre warns, ‘when institutional (academic) knowledge sets itself above lived experience, catastrophe is in the offing’.27 This is why he challenges the experts with the following questions: ‘Whence does the representation of space derive? Whose interests are served when it [the plan] becomes operational’?28 He urges the reconstruction of spatial ‘codes’.29 He argues for the recovery of connaissance and insists that the real task for the experts is ‘to uncover and stimulate demand even at the risk of their wavering in face of imposition of oppressive and repressive commands’.30

Lefebvre points out that in this dominated space is space with use values – ‘there are other forces on the boil, because the rationality of the state, of its techniques, plans and programmes, provokes opposition’.31 This opposition might be defeated but it lives on, fighting back from time to time to reassert and transform itself through struggle.32 If the inhabitants who should have the natural right to appropriation take up the challenge and demand a central role in decision making in the production of space, they may directly challenge the political-economic relationships that are central to the valorization of urban space.33 The question, however, is when would people summon up their ‘lived spaces/places’ and put forward their demand against the imposition of conceived spaces by the market and the state?34 Lefebvre asks: if the production of space is such ‘a matter of life and death’, then ‘why do they [the people] allow themselves to be manipulated in ways so damaging to their spaces and their daily life without embarking on massive revolts?’35 Why is protest left to “enlightened”, and hence elite, groups, who are in any case, largely exempt from these manipulations?36 Lefebvre believes that ‘the
silence of the “users” is indeed a problem – and it is the entire problem’. Lefebvre argues that slogans ‘to change life-style’ and ‘to change society’ are meaningless if there is no production of an appropriated space – what we need is the appropriation and the political use of space that counteract existing property and production relations that ‘shatter conceptions of space … in dreams, in imaginings, in utopias or in science fiction’. The idea is to place ‘appropriation over domination, demand over command, and use over exchange’. Hence, ‘space is becoming the principal stake of goal-directed actions and struggles’.

How can Lefebvre’s trialectic production of space framework guide our case study? Lefebvre cautions that his concept will lose ‘all forces if it is treated as an abstract “model” … if it cannot grasp the concrete’. The following case study attempts to ‘grasp the concrete’ through Lefebvre’s triadic spaces.

However, a note of caution is in order before presenting the case study. Many have used and extended Lefebvre’s framework in analysing urban issues in the context of different parts of the world: in the UK, Allen and Pryke (1994) demonstrate the limitation of Lefebvre’s framework in understanding the production of service space in London; Fyfe (1996) uses the framework to analyse the post-war modernization of Glasgow; Hubbard and Sanders (2003) examine the changing geographies of prostitution in the city of Birmingham; Uitermark (2004) reviews May Day protests in London in 2001; Whitehead (2003) rethinks about the politics of neighbourhood through Lefebvre’s production of space framework; in America, Goonewar-dena and Kipfer (2005) reflect upon the urban experience in Toronto; Jones (2000) looks at the production of space in Lexington, Kentucky, while McCann (1999), using the same city as his study site, adds the ‘racial dimension’ to Lefebvre’s framework; and in Southeast Asia, Cartier (1997) examines spatial politics in Melaka, and in a broad-brush manner, Kwok (1998) tries to use some of Lefebvre’s ideas to review the production of space in Hong Kong. These works demonstrate the need to go beyond a mechanical application of Lefebvre’s concepts to the local contexts and highlight the importance of heightened sensitivities to enrich Lefebvre’s triadic spatial framework with the concrete experience of space production in specific and unique space times. The following case not only keenly follows this tradition but will also try to examine how social activists tried to ‘uncover and stimulate demand’ among the silent users ‘in face of the imposition of oppressive and repressive demands’ in a ‘life and death’ battle of their lived space.

Given its French origin, one may wonder the utility of employing the Lefebvrian concepts to understand the production of space in Hong Kong, a former British Colony and now a Special Administrative Region under China. While the authors consider it worthwhile to use the Lefebvrian lens to review the case, two unique characteristics of Hong Kong as a spatial entity need to be first highlighted. In the Colonial era, especially before the Second World War (WWII), similar to McCann’s (1999) observation of Kentucky, race and the rights to the city were issues central to the production of space at least in the heart of the city of Victoria. This important point is often forgotten today. And as demonstrated in Cartier’s case of multi-racial Malaysia (1997), the conflicts between place-based cultural conservation (use value) and ‘development’ for evolving economic needs (economic value) within a largely top-down mode of governance could be complex and dynamic. While perhaps racial differences have receded in the background in the production of space, the right to deciding on the future development of the city is still not accorded to everyone in Hong Kong, an executive-led administration encouraging almost free reign of certain sectors in the market.
Star Ferry Pier and Queen’s Pier: a brief overview of spatial practices

The Star Ferry was established in the late 1800s, plying between Hong Kong Island and Kowloon. As can be seen in Figure 1, the Central District of Hong Kong has been extended through a series of reclamations from Victoria Harbour. As a result, the Star Ferry Pier on Hong Kong Island has been relocated four times in response to the changing shoreline. Over the years, the ferry service has been a well-patronized and popular feature of the Hong Kong life. In 1946, the average daily number of Star Ferry passengers was over 56,000 (20 million per year). In the 1950s, passenger numbers ranged between 34 and 38 million a year. In late 1957, due to further reclamation in Central harbourfront, the Star ferries moved to a new wharf (the third location) featuring a new Star Ferry clock. The ferry terminal was connected to Statue Square by a subway that cost a million Hong Kong dollars. If so many people were using the Star Ferry in the 1950s, should they not, using Lefebvre’s terms, have had the opportunity to appropriate the functional space, to ‘live’ it and imbue it with meanings? Should they not have also felt upset, like those who found it very hard to bid farewell to the Star Ferry and its clock tower in 2006? However, it seems that the demolition of the second-generation Star Ferry Pier and the construction of a new ferry pier in the 1950s were accepted as normal steps in the course of urban development. Such an indifferent attitude seemed to have also prevailed with the removal of Queen’s Pier. Built in 1925 at a site near the present day carpark next to the City Hall, Queen’s Pier was originally a wooden wharf named ‘Queen’s Statue Wharf’ that was restricted to use for ceremonial purposes by the Colonial Government. In 1953, it was relocated to Edinburgh Place in front of a new City Hall and became a public pier. Similar to the second-generation Star Ferry Pier, its removal in 2007 took place amid strong opposition and contentious debate.

The following paragraph reviews the migration of the piers through the Lefebvrian lens. Before WWII, the spatial practice of the dynamic trade-oriented Victoria City produced two distinct societies: one comprised the expatriate merchants and business class who dominated the commercial heart and excluded the Chinese population, and the other comprised Chinese nationals from the Mainland who were confined to the western part of Victoria City in a ‘China Town’ extending from Sheung Wan to Western District. Queen’s Pier, used for ceremonial purposes, was located in the commercial quarter of Victoria City in public space closed to the Chinese population. The Star Ferry Pier, in the transition zone between the expatriate-dominated economic heart and ‘China Town’, was just a functional facility for a fluid population with permanent homes elsewhere.

However, this situation changed after WWII when the Government planned another wave of reclamation in the 1950s. Spatial practices then were aimed at coping with the socio-economic demands of the time: the need to provide functional as well as public spaces in the once expatriate-dominated territory to facilitate economic growth brought about by industrialization in post-revolution China and the consequent needs for export infrastructure. The Star Ferry’s functional importance was boosted and the ceremonial Queen’s Pier also became a public pier. Planning for new public spaces in conjunction with a new City Hall complex and additional land by reclamation opened up a site in the heart of Victoria City for ordinary people to use, to imagine and to appropriate. While this spatial provision may not have been particularly enticing from an aesthetic point of view, it had historic importance: for the first time in the heart of Victoria City, the city of aristocrats and commercial elites,
space for ‘sitting and watching, waiting and talking’ was provided for the average ‘citizens’ of Hong Kong.47

Colonial Hong Kong that was once racially divided became a very different society after WWII with the onset of industrialization in the 1950s, the economic takeoff in the 1960s and 1970s, and the post-industrial economic restructuring from the 1980s. Through economic ups and downs, riots and various social movements, a fledgling civil society driven largely by some progressive elites began to slowly emerge and parts of this eventful history took place in the spaces associated with the Star Ferry Pier, Queen’s Pier and Edinburgh Place in front of the City Hall. The civil society has matured over time, especially after the reunification of Hong Kong with the Mainland and the Asian financial crisis. Unlike the early colonial era when the Chinese were content to stay out of certain parts of the City, the young civil society has made various attempts to ‘reclaim’ its rights to determining the future development of their place of birth.48 When the social activists realized that their ‘lived’ space was threatened by the Government’s plans, they chose not to remain silent.

Before WWII: two distinct societies in Victoria City – no appropriation, no lived space

The first-generation ‘Star Ferry’ was, according to Johnson, launched as the Morning Star in the early 1870s by Nowrojee, a highly successful baker and caterer on Queen’s Road who also ran several hotels.49 The story was that he ran the ferry service for delivering his bakery goods to Kowloon (annexed by Britain in 1860) as well as for cruising the harbour with his family and friends, and perhaps the hotel patrons.50 By the early 1880s, Nowrojee’s Morning Star was running regularly between Pedder’s Wharf and Kowloon Point.51 In 1898, Nowrojee signed a contract with Kowloon Wharf for the sale of the ferries to The ’Star’ Ferry Company Limited.52 As a result of the Praya Reclamation Scheme that was completed in 1905, in the early 1910s, the ‘Star’ Ferry Company built a new wharf at Ice House Street (the present site of Jardine House), with possession of the site secured until 1949.53

The second-generation ‘Star’ Wharf lay immediately west of the first-generation Queen’s Pier, which was completed in 1925. The ‘Queen’s Statue Wharf’, as it was then called, was built as a royal, ceremonial pier for the arrival and departure of governors and prominent figures, and formed an axis with Queen Victoria’s Statue in Statue Square, a large open space planned for the new business centre of the city of Victoria, yet not available for use by the general public.54 Statue Square was a cooperative project between the colonial Government of Hong Kong and Hongkong Bank. According to Lambot and Chambers, in 1895, the Hongkong Bank, with its headquarters on the seaward side of Queen’s Road and adjoining the Praya Reclamation (1887–1905), was granted Crown Leases of 999 years on two lots in front of its headquarters55 (Figure 2). In 1901, the Government wrote to the Managing Director of the Hongkong Bank concerning its plan to preserve in perpetuity a large open space in close proximity to Queen Victoria’s Statue and sought the cooperation of the Bank to refrain from building on its portions west of the statue.56 The Bank agreed that ‘the site should remain open space for all time’ and Statue Square was established as the ‘green heart’ of the city of Victoria.57 In 1934, the Hongkong Bank leased a portion of the neighbouring vacated City Hall site from the Government to build new and larger headquarters. In 1935, the enlarged headquarters were officially opened, facing the city’s ‘green heart’ that would be ‘preserved in perpetuity’. However, similar to the ceremonial pier which was off-limits to the general public,
the ‘four quadrants of the Square surrounding the statue were closely trimmed ornamental lawns and flower-beds, surrounded by low railings to keep off passers-by’ 58 (Figure 3). The restricted access to the green open space continued until 1947 when the low railings around the Edwardian-style Square were eventually removed.59

Figure 2. Land lots in front of the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank (HSBC).
Source: Adapted and modified from I. Lambot and G. Chambers, *One Queen’s Road Central: The Headquarters of Hongkong Bank Since 1864*, 89.
extending along the western end’. The transition areas between the Edwardian City of Victoria and the China Town naturally became contested spaces. As early as 1844, the Government had forced 27 Upper Bazaar land parcels to be sold off to Europeans for commercial use, leading to strong sentiments among the Chinese merchants, who labelled the Government as ‘bandits’. In fact, the Government relocated Chinese residents to the hillsides of Tai Ping Shan to make room for the construction of a European-style town. The Tai Ping Shan and Lower Bazaar areas were designated as Chinese residential area, and the Chief Magistrate ‘decreed that no Europeans, with the exception of police officers, were allowed to reside in a Chinese-populated area’.

Colonial Hong Kong then housed two cities, as Carroll portrays:

rational segregation was enforced both legally and informally. Chinese were barred from the Hong Kong Club and the Hong Kong Jockey Club, and in some hotels Chinese guests could stay only in certain rooms or could not stay overnight … A particularly visible example of this government-enforced racial divide was Victoria Peak, the exclusive hill district on Hong Kong Island where no Chinese, except for the servants, cooks, houseboys and drivers working for Europeans, were welcome to live. In 1902, this residential segregation became law when the Colonial Office allowed the Peak to be used solely by residents approved by the governor. Subsequent ordinances passed in 1904 and 1918 explicitly barred Chinese and Eurasians from living on the Peak … The Chinese members of the Legislative Council did not oppose the Peak ordinance. The spatial practice then sustained a ‘separatist’ society, ‘the Chinese and British communities lived largely separate lives’.
Figure 1 shows that the sites of the Star Ferry, both the original pier of Nowrojee and the second-generation pier built in the 1900s on what is now the Jardine House site, were situated in the transition zone between the two faces of the city of Victoria. According to Johnson, passengers of the Star Ferry at the turn of the twentieth century were carried in three classes and European passengers could not travel in third class. The Star Ferry experienced with Hong Kong the ups and downs of the inter-war years. It returned to service in the turbulent post-WWII years until 1949 when the pier leases expired. In 1950, the Government adopted profit control as a policy for all public utilities companies and the Star Ferry was no exception. Throughout the 1950s, the Star Ferry continued to carry 34–38 million passengers each year. Were the people who used the ferry attached emotionally to the pier then? As argued by Lefebvre, the coherence of social and spatial practices ‘implies a guaranteed level of competence and specific level of performance’ of each member of a given society. In pre-WWII Hong Kong, the Chinese immigrants who came to Hong Kong when China was in turmoil and returned to China in calmer days managed to cope with the identity of a second-rate citizen on the ‘foreign’ soil of colonial Hong Kong – they were excluded from the City of Victoria. One doubts whether they would call the Chinese quarters in the western part of Victoria City home. Perhaps the removal of the Star Ferry in the post-war years could very much be just another minor change in their war-distraught lives. In any case, new spatial practices emerged in post-WWII Hong Kong.

Post-WWII: new spatial practices, new conceived space giving rise to lived space and its eventual demise

The birth of the lived space surrounding the piers

Hong Kong as a commercial city was ‘raped’ during the Japanese occupation. ‘The Peak area had been the worst victim of the looting in 1945. Not a house had escaped, not a house was habitable and therefore much time and energy were taken in their rehabilitation.’ The defeat of the British during the Japanese occupation had eventually led to the gradual removal of the pre-war race and status barriers within the ruling class, giving rise to a more homogeneous, rational and powerful business group composed of Europeans and of Chinese, who were less tied to London. As many colonies gained their independence in the post-war era, ‘the British Government was forced to alter its colonial policy and make positive efforts to improve Hong Kong’s development and in 1945 the British Colonial Office … earmarked 1 million GBP to assist Hong Kong’s development over the next decade’.

The Colony experienced a trade boom from 1946 to 1949, accompanied by a large influx of population from the Mainland, probably due to the civil war, leading to an acute housing shortage. The defeat of the Nationalist Party in 1949 accelerated the influx of immigrants from the Mainland. With the influx of capitalists from China and their import of capital goods, Hong Kong became an industrial city almost overnight. With increasing population and rising industrial activities, reclamation continued as a popular spatial practice to accommodate growth. In 1955, a large reclamation plan was conceived to expand the city of Victoria. It necessitated once again the removal and relocation of the Star Ferry and Queen’s piers. According to Lambot and Chambers, a subway was then planned to link the new piers with Chater Road and the Government suggested that ‘the [Hongkong and Shanghai] Bank exchange its section of the Square, on the north-west corner, for the Government-owned
section in front of the Supreme Court’. This exchange resulted in the Bank becoming the owner of the two lots facing Des Voeux Road (Figure 2).

In the Government’s 1961 Central Area Redevelopment proposals on the newly reclaimed land, the Director of Public Works explained the necessity of using the majority of the land to improve community facilities, ‘rather than to increase the existing preponderance of private buildings … in this congested part of the city’. With the expansion of the Central District northward and westward to Possession Point, the original Queen’s Pier and the Star Ferry Pier (second generation) were moved to a more accessible location. The third-generation Star Ferry Piers were also located west of the second-generation Queen’s Pier, which then faced the new City Hall complex, with its water edge laid out as a city garden for pedestrian uses. This setting of the main cultural building in the city was supposed to ‘provide a suitable entrance to the Colony for visitors arriving at Queen’s Pier’ (Figure 4). More importantly, Queen’s Pier was no longer just a ceremonial pier, as it had become a public pier in 1954. This new public space was enhanced by a clock tower in the middle of the neighbouring 1957 Star Ferry terminal. The ‘clock’ was indeed a cousin of Big Ben in London and the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia, made by the more than 400-year-old mechanical clock manufacturer, Whitechapel Bell Foundry Limited. To the west of the new pier, the plan was to develop a podium linking all the amenities, shops, restaurants and cinemas. Indeed, the relocation of both piers in the fifties symbolized a change of relationship

Figure 4. Queen’s Pier in its new cultural setting in the 1960s.
Source: Director of Public Works, City of Victor: Hong Kong Central Area Redevelopment, 30, figure 14.
between the colonial government and the people from that of ‘aristocrats and commons’ to that of ‘modern government and citizens’ and carried historic meaning in the colonial history of Hong Kong."

Whether Hong Kongers became ‘citizens’ then is certainly debatable, it is nevertheless true that for the first time in the planning history of the city of Victoria, the Government’s conceived space (plan) had provided the average citizens a right to the city, an opportunity to ‘sit and watch, wait and talk’ in the economic and political heart of the once racially segregated city, especially in the once Edwardian quarter of Statue Square. To use Lefebvre’s argument, this conceived space, born of the post-war colonial spatial practice to meet the needs of an industrializing post-war economy, had transformed the performance and competency of the people, as they could then gain access to the planned space and appropriate it! An important landmark event took place in 1966. The ‘Star Ferry was involved in one of the most influential social movement events in Hong Kong, ignited by the five-cent fare increase application. A 27-year old man named So Sau-chung staged a self-motivated hunger strike at the Island Ferry Pier. His arrest later was followed by several riots in Kowloon. The fare increase had led to riots, referred to as the Star Ferry Riots by some historians. The riot is commonly considered a milestone of Hong Kong’s social movements.78 The Star Ferry riots need to be understood in the context of rapid growth of Hong Kong in the 1950s and 1960s when the Government was busy endowing ‘space’ with exchange values that often just worsened people’s already dismal living and working conditions.

When people chose not to be silent in 1966 and 1967, fundamental changes took place in the Colonial Government: introduction of the ‘city-district-officer scheme’ so that the Government would be ‘closer’ to the communities; reforms in the fields of education, youth, labour, medical and social services, including nature conservation; and the introduction of a 10-year housing programme and the related development of new towns. As the Colonial Government started to be more proactive in devising policies to enhance people’s lives and livelihood, the politically apathetic refugee society rooted in the Confucius teaching of obedience and patience gave way to new generations of Hong Kongers who were born, raised and educated in the dynamic East-meets-West society, and some of them refused to follow their parents’ footsteps as the ‘silent majority’. Instead, they were more ready to exert their rights as citizen. The first-generation ‘pressure groups’ to emerge included the Heritage Society, the Conservancy Association, the Hong Kong Observers, the Education Action Group and the Professional Teachers Union. Given its strategic location, the Star Ferry became one of the central rallying points for many of the social events organized by these groups. Similarly, when Queen’s Pier was adjacent to the City Hall complex and Edinburgh Place, it became a popular spot for social gathering, fishing, boarding launches for cruise trips and dating.79 Given its proximity to Edinburgh Place, it was often the gathering place for civic and social functions, including the cross-harbour swimming race.80 It was also the place used for the Campaign for Chinese as Official Language as well as the Protect Diaoyutai Island Movement in 1970. The conceived space near Queen’s Pier and Star Ferry (post-WWII) not only symbolized the opportunity for new generations of Hong Kongers to live and appropriate space to imbue it with meaning; this public space actually gave them a right to the commercial and political heart of the city core, a right that was denied in Victorian Hong Kong.
The demise of the lived spaces around the two piers

In 1987, to accommodate growth and cope with increasing transport demand, the Government commissioned the ‘Central and Wan Chai Reclamation Feasibility Study’ to examine the planning, engineering and financial viability of further reclamation in Central and Wan Chai. In late 1988, the Government proposed a HK$7 billion reclamation of ‘Central’s golden foreshore’ to create 60 hectares of land for high-density commercial development and a 1.4-km road tunnel, which might lead to the removal of the City Hall, the Tamar site, the Star Ferry terminal and the General Post Office.81 In 1989, the Government announced the Port and Airport Development Strategy to boost the confidence of the economy after the Spring political turmoil in China.82 From 1990 to 1997, 334 hectares of land were reclaimed for West Kowloon, one-third of the area of the Kowloon Peninsula.83 Appalled by the scale of reclamation, the Society for Protection of the Harbour (SPH) was formed in 1995 to aim at protecting the Harbour from further reclamation. The deputy chairperson of the SPH, at that time a legislative councillor, drafted a private-member-initiated Protection of the Harbour Bill, which was enacted before the handover in 1997. In 1999, the Protection of the Harbour Ordinance (PHO) was amended to cover the entire harbour.84

In May 1998, when the draft Central District (Extension) Outline Zoning Plan (OZP) was gazetted, a reclamation of 38 hectares was planned to provide land for essential transport infrastructure and to re-provision existing waterfront facilities, including the Star Ferry and Queen’s Pier. In August 1999, Sinclair, a columnist, likened the suggestion of removing Star Ferry to the tearing down of the Opera House in Sydney or the Tower Bridge in London and lamented the fact that the original plan did not even include any relocation provision nor notification to the owner of the Star Ferry.85 According to the Government, an Environmental Impact Assessment Study was conducted in 2001 to assess the heritage impacts on the Star Ferry Pier, Queen’s Pier and City Hall. While the consultant recommended keeping the City Hall complex intact, it was suggested that the clock tower be relocated.86 These were done without the engagement of the general public.

The Asian financial crisis and the economic depression in Hong Kong prompted concern by the business community about a possible excessive supply of Grade-A office space and land for commercial use resulting from this reclamation plan.87 Eventually, the plan was re-gazetted on 16 July 1999 and the amended Central District (Extension) OZP with a minimum reclamation of 18 hectares was approved by the Chief Executive in Council in 2002. Since debate had focused on the extent of reclamation during the plan-making process, it was only during the implementation of the OZP that people started to realize that there was a problem with implementation and detailed design. Figure 5 shows the new plan for the Central harbourfront. As argued by Lefebvre, in the dominant space (conceived space), ‘constraints and violence are countered at every turn’: the Star Ferry Piers, the clock tower and Queen’s Pier as well as part of Edinburgh Place, the first piece of accessible civic space in the commercial heart of colonial Hong Kong, had to be removed to make way for a road, other underground facilities and commercial land uses.88 In other words, this plan, the conceived space, would erase the decades-old lived spaces that had been appropriated and imbued with meanings by post-WWII Hong Kongers, a space that had celebrated their ‘citizenship’ in post-Victorian Hong Kong.

Indeed, the 1997 return to the motherland has boosted a sense of ownership and belonging by the emerging civil society in the city. As a result, the top-down style of urban planning has
become a bone of contention between the Government and the more progressive members of society who started to question the convention wisdom of reclamation and have become vigilant in searching for a deeper understanding of the development logic adopted by Hong Kong. The ‘Piers saga’ was just one of the more prominent cases. Feeling great sensitivity to the impending loss of their ‘lived’ space, social activists, including planning-related professionals, started to employ their ‘connaissance’ knowledge to criticize the Government’s plan and launched a last minute rescue campaign to stop the demolition and to ‘uncover and stimulate demand’. In a letter petitioning the Chief Executive, the SEE Network (the city’s first magazine to address sustainable development issues) asked that the demolition of the Star Ferry clock tower be halted in order to buy time for research on its cultural, aesthetic, social and scientific values so that any heritage features could be identified and retained in future design, allowing history a footprint in the new harbourfront. One of the oldest NGOs in town, the Conservancy Association argued that by better design, the road alignment (P2 Road) could be integrated with the Star Pier and Queen’s Pier to create a vibrant historical corridor linking the new harbourfront for the public. It argued that this prominent historical corridor would not only conserve heritage and mark the historical shoreline but also sustain collective memory and create a tourist attraction.
Even the Panel on Planning, Lands and Works in the Legislative Council urged the Government to defer the demolition and to incorporate ‘upon extensive public consultation, the existing clock tower together with the relevant building structures into the future new development plan for the Central District, with a view to preserving, on a people-oriented basis, the historical traces that form part of the collective memory’. On 19 November 2006, the Civic Party, Democratic Party, Harbourfront Enhancement Committee, Hong Kong Institute of Architects, People’s Council for Sustainable Development, Clear the Air and Earth Care jointly met to urge the public to fight for the preservation of the pier. So Sau Chung (now a monk), who started a hunger strike against the fare increase of Star Ferry that triggered the riots in 1966, joined the protest. When the Government was about to demolish the Star Ferry clock tower, the protestors occupied the working areas for 24 hours. The protest ended when one of the protestors was arrested. On 12 December 2006, the Government started the demolition of the clock tower, drawing widespread condemnation from the public, legislators and conservationists.

When the clock tower was dismantled, the activists tried to protect Queen’s Pier by occupying and living in it. The Hong Kong Institute of Architects argued that ‘Queen’s Pier is a site of great historical significance that encapsulates the essence of Hong Kong as a unique city of China.’ It should be conserved IN-SITU to inspire the future direction of Hong Kong’. The Institute suggested that ‘the site of the Pier, Edinburgh Place and City Hall be designed as an inseparable group … to maintain the integrity of the spatial relationship and thus the significant historical meaning … Heritage conservation is an inspiration to future generations through respecting our history’. Before the actual ‘dismantling’ of Queen’s Pier on 1 August 2007, three students, as part of a group called ‘Local Action’, started a hunger strike on the pier on 27 July. They argued that the Queen’s Pier–Edinburgh Place–City Hall complex was an important historic landmark and urged the Government to include conservation, people’s livelihood and environmental protection in its development agenda. They demanded a democratic planning system!

In May 2007, Designing Hong Kong, another NGO that is concerned with the built environment, applied for 23 amendments to the OZP. Many other local social and cultural groups attempted to ‘stimulate’ interest in people’s ‘lived’ space at Queen’s Pier, including, among others, the hosting of a Star Photo Exhibition at the Old Star Ferry Pier, a Protect Our Star Ferry Pier march, a candlelight vigil to mark the pier’s 49th anniversary and so on. On the eve of the removal of Queen’s Pier, about 200 people gathered outside it for a candlelight vigil to show support for the hunger strikers. On 1 August 2007, the 30-plus protesters were cleared from the site and Queen’s Pier was completely demolished in February 2008, with its base piles removed and stored for future reinstatement. Today, the ‘lived’ space has been buried under a road (Figure 6).

Concluding remarks: interpreting the trialectic spatial relationships

Why was there so much controversy when the Government demolished the third-generation Star Ferry Pier and the second-generation Queen’s Pier? Why was there no apparent controversy surrounding the previous ‘incarnations’ of the piers? In trying to answer these questions, we retraced the development of Victoria City through the spatial lens of Lefebvre. We discovered that the pre- and post-WWII Victoria City exhibited different spatial practices. Before the British
Figure 6. The piers sites now covered by a road.
Source: Courtesy of Mr. Paul Zimmerman.
defeat by the Japanese in 1941, spatial practices in the city of Victoria had sustained social practices of a resource-strapped Colonial Government ruling a racially segregated society: the expatriate aristocrats and commercial elites in the heart of the City and the Chinese of various trades confined to the ‘western’ part of the City. Queen’s Pier was first created as a royal and ceremonial pier for the landing of the Governors of Hong Kong and other prominent officials and guests of the Colony. Adjacent to the pier, the ‘open’ space of Statue Square with ‘Edwardian dignity’, situated in the heart of Victoria City, was not really ‘open’ for public enjoyment, and was actually closed to the Chinese. The earlier generations of the Star Ferry on its west were built in a transition zone, serving both ‘worlds’ of fluctuating migrants. Hence, Lefebvre is right to argue that ‘spatial practice regulates life – it does not create it’.  

These spatial practices were no longer sustained in the post-WWII international setting with the rise of a new business class made up of both Chinese and foreigners and with the challenges faced by the British colonizers. To cope with rapidly growing economic activities and interactions of the people on both sides of Victoria Harbour, the then Colonial Government, equipped with better resources from Britain, initiated a new wave of reclamation in the 1950s and 1960s. The new plan, the ambitious conceived space, introduced in the interstices of functional spaces that facilitate people’s movements between different modes of public transport, opened spaces that the general public could appropriate and transform. This new spatial practice gave birth to the first ever ‘lived’ space for the people in Victoria City. The Star Ferry, Queen’s Pier and the adjacent Edinburgh Square, together with the City Hall, had become a historic symbolic space for the post-WWII baby boomers in Hong Kong. This historic public realm encapsulated their right to the economic and political heart of Victoria City, giving them a legitimate presence and identity. And over the years, they had diligently appropriated the space for all sorts of social, economic and political activities. Hence, when the Government initiated yet another wave of reclamation with a new plan, new conceived space, to ‘wipe’ out this ‘lived’ space evolved over the years, the more enlightened citizens equipped with ‘connaissance knowledge that refuses to acknowledge power’ were determined to defend it.

Although the social activists failed to prevent the demolition of the Star Ferry and its clock tower and the removal of Queen’s Pier, their protests and campaigns forced the Government to promise to rebuild a new clock tower incorporating the old mechanical clock and to reinstate Queen’s Pier on the new Central harbourfront once the reclamation project is completed. This is why Lefebvre advocates the importance of breaking ‘silence’ and making claims to a right to the city and urging experts to ‘uncover and stimulate demand’ in socio-spatial practice as an important safeguard against the imposition of conceived spaces by the state over lived experiences of the users. His aspiration is to work out ‘counter-proposals, discussing them with “authorities” and forcing those authorities to take them into account’. 

However, there remains perhaps one unanswered issue in Lefebvre’s triadic spaces: assuming that we have managed to identify people’s ‘lived’ experiences, to ‘stimulate and inspire demand’ through ‘a political use of space’, how can we assess, evaluate and generate ‘counter-proposals’? How can we be sure that we are not ‘privileging’ the space times of certain stakeholders over other equally legitimate space users? Can the few dozens or hundreds of activists represent the ‘lived’ experience of all those who deserve an equal right to the city? As revealed in the case of the ‘Piers saga’, the problem of the ‘silence of the users’ as argued by Lefebvre is still very real.
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