

Exercise type: P

Group work in Basle and in Hong Kong

Introduction: Tuesday, 30.04.2004, 10 AM at ETH Studio Basel, Spitalstrasse 12, 4056 Basel

INERTIA

A research on urban transformation

A portrait of Hong Kong

With the Napoli project of the winter semester, Studio Basel has inaugurated a research on a series of international cities. These investigations are based on the assumption that contemporary cities do not develop towards a common vanishing point, as somehow asserted by the current debate on the urban evolution: rather, they consolidate, transform or adapt their specific traits. These processes are not only undertaken by consolidating their local specificity or historical tradition, but by developing new modalities of transformation and novel forms of differentiation in the wake of the contemporary internationally interconnected circumstances. Cities are hence, through the processes of globalisation, drawn back to their own materic configuration. With this we could imply that these developments do not only invest the exploding 'global cities': on the contrary we are interested in the study of different urban conditions –peripheral, stagnating, traditional or without history, anonymous or famous– on basis of their diverse transformation devices that underlie their specific situations.

How are cities developing, changing and adapting their bodies, their physical configurations, when they are connected to the international energy flows? How are they reconfiguring their specific physiognomy?

With Hong Kong we investigate a city that will disclose these questions in a complex and rich modality.

The British ruled Asiatic city – with its extraordinary economical and demographic dynamics – has assumed, with the 1997 handover to communist China, a radically novel orientation. The creation of the HKSAR raises problematic and almost paradoxical issues regarding the communal propriety of land, the social housing systems and the public welfare policies. The transformation of the city, besides its global and local orientations, also implies a parallel and problematic positioning towards the People's Republic of China.

The perceptive, analytical and representational instances of this city will be the starting and central point of the research that will try to outline a 'portrait of a contemporary city' from its physical configuration. This will be different from a traditional general urban description and will focus on the specific traits and individual characteristics of Hong Kong. This portrait will render Hong Kong's contemporary adaptation, change, revision, renovation and transformation processes: a physiognomy of a moment within an evolutionary trajectory.



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Some of the research topics are given, others will have to be clarified in detail. The rapid development of the housing developments; the unusual relation to topography and to the ground, the urban nature of a territory which is still isolated, though in a novel manner; the large denial of public urban space at the foot of office towers and high-rise residential buildings; the public life of the clubs; the border towards Mainland China; the specific planning techniques and procedures and their role in the city, will be the starting points of the investigations on the current state of affairs of Hong Kong.

The fieldwork will be conducted in collaboration with the Architecture Department of the Chinese University of Hong Kong: they will support the organisation issues of the research activities and also provide help on the level of content. CUHK also supports Studio Basel in the preparatory phase of the course. The research will be lead, as usual in Studio Basel, by small students groups. These will be supported in Hong Kong by Master students and Teaching assistants of the Chinese University.

The results of the fieldwork in Hong Kong and of the activities conducted in Basel will be a series of maps, diagrams, interviews, architectural portraits, urban biographies, diagrams of transformation. The research and activity will disclose the generating and transformation processes of urban matter in Hong Kong interfacing its population, urban culture and economy, to form a panoramic vision of its specificity, free of rigid teleology and deterministic sources for its concrete urban, institutional and architectural forms. At Studio Basel, research is basically not different from project, the Portrait is research as project.

The final presentation of the student's work will be in the form of a booklet and a slide presentation.

The work will be conducted on a weekly base at ETH Studio Basel's premises in Spitalstrasse 12, Basel.

Fieldwork in Hong Kong, from May 10 to May 21 (including the seminary week), is part of the activity of the course and will be mandatory. The previewed costs of the Hong Kong fieldwork (travel expenses and hotel) will be of approximately 1400.- CHF per student. Financial issues should not be an hindrance to the participation to this course. Access to a special fund can be discussed in case of grave impediments. A passport valid until 6 months after the Seminary Week is required for entering China. For organisational purposes, students are requested to bring their passport on the opening day of the semester.

A series of readings of the most important literature of the recent past on urban studies will be part of the semester program.

Bibliography:

Aldo Rossi, L'architettura della città, Padova: Marsilio 1966

Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, Steven Izenour, Learning from Las Vegas, Cambridge, Massachussets: MIT Press 1978

Christopher Alexander, Notes on the sythesis of form, Cambridge, Massachussets: Harvard University Press 1964

Rem Koolhaas, Delirious New York, Cambridge, Massachussets: MIT Press 1978

Rem Koolhaas, Stefano Boeri, Sanford Kwinter et al., Mutations, Barcelona: Actar 2000

Multiplicity, USE Uncertain states of Europe, Milan: Skira 2003

