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Geographies of abstraction, urban entrepreneurialism, and the production of new cultural spaces: the West Kowloon Cultural District, Hong Kong

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Abstract. During the 1990s and 2000s understandings of urban politics have become dominated by narratives of neoliberal urban entrepreneurialism. Considerations of, and even interest in, the diversities that exist in the specific politics that shape place developments have often been relegated to a matter of secondary interest when understood in relation to broader structural global forces. This is particularly significant as urban development projects have become increasingly bound-up with cultural programmes, many of which are embedded in the social relations of places, yet are often dismissed as subservient to global, fast-track development logics. This paper draws on a study of the politics surrounding the development of one of Asia's largest culture-led urban development projects, the West Kowloon Cultural District, Hong Kong. It explores the complex relationships between contemporary development discourses and historically embedded postcolonial subjectivities and policy legacies. It uses the evidence to argue for more nuanced interpretations of change, and calls for a stronger focus on the concrete relations in and through which policy abstractions are formed.

Keywords: Hong Kong, urban entrepreneurialism, culture, regeneration, abstractions

Introduction

The literature on urban entrepreneurialism provides a powerful and seemingly prescient narrative for making sense of contemporary forms of urban regeneration, with a multitude of studies documenting the spread and impacts of such strategies in action (see, for example, Wacquant, 2008). As neoliberalism has been rolled out over the 1990s and 2000s so the narrative of urban entrepreneurialism has spread, with the effect that studies of place politics and geographical differentiation have often been relegated to a matter of secondary interest when understood in relation to broader, structural global forces. Much of this work is influenced by the familiar and much-cited writings of authors such as Henri Lefebvre and their structural understandings of policy abstractions and practices. And yet, as authors such as Barnett (2011) note, the danger of neoliberal interpretations of urban politics is that they leave little room for local political and social relations to have anything but a secondary role in shaping contemporary urban practices. They become, in Barnett's terms, 'residualised' and presented as having little influence on the form and character of urban political fixes in specific places. This, in turn, raises a series of questions over the extent to which local social relations influence urban development programmes, particularly those that seem to incorporate global neoliberal agendas.

This paper draws on research on one of the most significant culture-led urban policy projects in Asia, the West Kowloon Cultural District (WKCD) in Hong Kong, to explore some of these wider debates over contemporary modes of urban politics. It examines the rationalities that have shaped entrepreneurial and cultural interventions in the city and the impacts that local politics has had on the governance and management of the project. It uses the evidence taken from interviews, policy strategies, and other secondary sources to argue that too much of the writing on urban entrepreneurialism sees 'the concrete' as a manifestation of neoliberal policy abstractions. The effect of this is to undervalue the significance of the embedded social and political processes through which development projects are mobilised and to privilege top-down understandings of the rationalities, logics, and practices of urban policy agendas. Whilst the study will show that global economic rationalities play an important role in shaping the West Kowloon development, a fuller explanation for the concrete practices that have taken place requires an engagement with the political, institutional, and cultural legacies of postcolonialism and the complex and multilayered history of cultural policy in the city. The paper, therefore, reasserts the importance of 'the social' and engages with recent debates in urban studies over globalisation, circuits of 'fast track' policy making, and neoliberal governance. Following Sayer (1992), we argue that more thought needs to be given to the *concrete* relations in and through which abstractions are formed, and the diverse geographies of abstraction that emerge. We begin by discussing characterisations of culture-led regeneration before turning to the Hong Kong case study.

Characterising contemporary culture-led regeneration

The rise of cultural-led regeneration

Two decades ago Harvey noted that

> "there seems to be a general consensus emerging throughout the advanced capitalist world that positive benefits are to be had by cities taking an entrepreneurial stance to economic development. What is remarkable, is that this consensus seems to hold across national boundaries and even across political parties and ideologies" (1989, page 4).

With hindsight this appears to be a prescient prediction as a range of actors, from central policy makers to local governments, have sought to engineer and sustain the entrepreneurial city, upholding it as orthodoxy for economic development (Ward, 2003). Urban entrepreneurialism represents the handmaiden of global neoliberalism, with development programmes in many cities, becoming more elitist and focused on the creation of gentrified urban environments that attract 'creative' people who can act as a springboard for new forms of growth (see Peck et al, 2010). In places such as East Asia this has been supplemented by a new emphasis on the creation of 'knowledge societies' in which urban policy "is directed toward the promotion of educated and self-managing citizens who can compete in global knowledge markets" (Ong, 2007, page 6; see also Hoffman, 2006). As Ong argues, these 'pro-talent' agendas reconfigure social and urban policies so that they select "some groups for special attention" (page 6), whilst marginalising others.

One growing trend within this wider picture has been the greater prevalence given to *culture-led* regeneration. Development programmes increasingly seek to produce urban spaces that both establish new cultural infrastructure for the expansion of cultural (industrial) sectors and generate new forms of entrepreneurialism within urban populations. In many cases this results in a "cultural transformation of previously productive cities into 'spectacular' cities of and for consumption, populated by a harmonious and cosmopolitan citizenry" (Hall and Hubbard, 1998, page 8). It can also contribute to wider developmental policy objectives as "a city which invests in a new cultural centre … is putting its flag on an international culture map to gain a global competitive edge" (Miles and Miles, 2004, page 55). This, in turn, can help cities to overcome some of the problems associated with

deindustrialisation, whilst enabling policy makers to foster cultural participation and civic pride (see Garcia, 2004; Landry, 2008). Cultural policy thus represents a particular form of intervention that seeks to identify, fix, and objectify particular visions of culture in order to fulfil a broader set of objectives and priorities. Culture is no longer assumed to be a dynamic process, but becomes a static, narrowly defined entity that is used as the means to achieve a particular end. As Wacquant (2005, page 21) notes, "culture is always an instrument of vision and division, at once a product, a weapon, and a stake of struggles for symbolic life and death". Consequently, "every relation of meaning is also a relation of force". In city-states such as Singapore, culture has become an economic instrument that promotes development over and above other social concerns and understandings (see Kong, 2009).

For political economists, the widespread diffusion of such policies reflects and reproduces the rolling out of global neoliberal agendas. Such approaches point to the homogenisation and commodification of urban cultures, so that "references to ethnic and regional culture in design, content and operation ... all but disappear between the design concept stage where community and political support (and minimisation of resistance) is required, and the final product" (Evans, 2003, page 435). Urban cultural policies become embedded into wider neoliberal ideologies that are "shaped in a few centres and then diffused outwards, and a political project that aims to reorder the territorial framing of capital accumulation" (Barnett, 2011, page 270). Diverse cultures and forms of creativity are actively undermined as policy elites establish and enforce their own visions for what culture is and how it can be (re) produced by economic and social agents. Moreover, such programmes are often justified and legitimated by a politics of inclusion, or what Dirlik (2001) criticises as 'chameleon-like' attempts "to assume localised colourings that enable … the remaking of places in accordance with its own marketing and production needs while flaunting a new found concern with place and community" (page 23). The result is that capitalist modernity "has rendered places into inconveniences in the path of progress to be dispensed with, whether by erasure or by rendering them into commodities … but a progress without people" (page 42).

Such writing draws on particular understandings of the processes through which *abstractions* of space and the 'urban' are mobilised. In most capitalist cities, particularly those now undergoing entrepreneurial forms of redevelopment, there exists what Lefebvre termed 'an abyss' between "the mental [idealised] sphere on the one side and physical and social spheres on the other" (1991, page 6) that is a disconnection between the representations of space(s) as conceived by planners, architects, and policy makers and spaces as lived and culturally experienced by urban subjects. Representations of the entrepreneurial city, for example, become "tied to the relations of production and to the 'order' which those relations impose, and hence to the signs and codes that legitimate a particular set of social relations" (Lefebvre, 1991, page 33). They are "constructed by professionals and technocrats with arcane insights and jargon, objectified plans and paradigms' to promote forms of urbanism that reflect "what's in the head rather than in the body" (Merrifield, 2006, page 107). The net result is the production of "abstract representations of space deployed by architects and planners (that) over-code 'spaces of everyday practice' by 'de-corporealising' the city" (Lefebvre, cited in Hubbard, 2006, page 103). Spaces as lived and perceived by urban populations become subordinate to the power of top-down abstractions (see also Harvey, 2009). Such narratives have become increasingly influential in writings on urban politics, particularly in relation to what Peck et al (2010) term 'fast policy' transfers between elites in different cities (see also Ward, 2006). Culture-led urban projects seem to objectify Peck et al's (2010) vision of a boundless process of neoliberalisation in cities, in which neoliberal logics encompass an ever-growing list of policy fields. And yet, despite their obvious appeal, there are clear limits

to these characterisations of how policy making works and how abstractions are mobilised in different places, a theme that is discussed in the next section.

Producing spaces, producing cultures—the abstractions and rationalities of cultural urban policy

There are three principal lines of critique to these dominant narratives, which open up fresh areas for empirical research. First, as Clarke (2008) argues, the danger of political–economic readings is that local social and political relations become characterised, in relatively simple terms, as subservient to a global neoliberal logic. As Barnett (2011, page 269) puts it, the social becomes "a residual effect of more fundamental political–economic rationalities". Paradoxically, much political–economic writing therefore draws on a narrative of depoliticisation, as "any observed variation or adaptation of neoliberal ideology to local context does not cause theorists of neo-liberalisation to revise the basics of their theories. It only confirms the main outlines of their narrative" (page 275; see also Robinson and Parnell, 2011). There is a tendency to downplay what Ong (2007) terms the "unstable constellations" of interacting global forms and situated political regimes that exist in the world (see also Ong and Collier, 2005). If, as Dirlik (2001, page 23) claims, "the struggle for place in the concrete is a struggle against power and the hegemony of abstractions", then it is difficult to square this with a tacit acceptance that such struggles are always doomed to failure in the context of structural processes of neoliberal domination.[(1)]

Second, within such discourses it is assumed that through policy abstractions a simple, objectified view of a natural and/or innate cultural identity of place can be mobilised to colonise everyday life and shape the practices of urban dwellers in predictable and intended ways. For Williams (1965) the concept of culture could be viewed as a system of meanings that inform and enable everyday practice; essentially, culture is a way of life, concerned with both the mental frames of reference of individuals and communities and with forms of practice, or doing things. For Belsey (2002) cultural practices therefore consist of "the inscription in stories, rituals, customs, objects and practices of the meanings in circulation at a specific time and place" (page 113). Culture cannot be understood as something that is universally tangible or concrete and/or can simply be fixed by policy interventions. Rather, culture is fluid and takes on different geographical forms. From this perspective, culture is central to human agency and structure; it simultaneously enables and constrains social behaviour. It is not something that can easily be captured by elites and transformed into rational political–economic projects. This is a process that will always be contested and lead to unintended consequences, whilst also opening up new spaces for resistance, opposition, and the fermentation of different cultural practices.

Third, the implicit and explicit use of Lefebvrian readings of abstraction in much of the writing on urban politics precludes a broader assessment of the processes involved in abstraction formation, their geographies, and their embeddedness in place politics. As Sayer (1992) notes, any abstraction "isolates in thought a one-sided or partial aspect of an object. What we abstract from are the many other aspects which together constitute concrete objects" (page 87). Abstractions are, therefore, "precise rather than vague" and emerge through what Sayer terms a "double hermeneutic" between external sensory information and internal conceptualisations of the world. Metaphors and theoretical constructs are mobilised and deployed individually and collectively to 'make sense' of the world. Any understanding of concrete events or practices therefore involves a double movement: concrete→abstract, abstract→concrete' (page 87). But, as all abstractions emerge from particular, and often

[(1)] Hoffman's (2006) in-depth empirical work on creative class strategies in China, where cultural and social policy has been used to create 'patriotic professionals', demonstrates vividly how the meanings of creative-class entrepreneurship have become embedded within both the global economic logics and domestic political projects.

precise, readings of concrete processes and phenomena, they always involve a 'truth selection process', in which selected imaginations are converted into concrete policies and programmes of action that, in turn, shape the political and physical environments of cities. The types of abstraction, outlined by political–economic authors in the section above, represent what Sayer (1992) terms "safe abstractions" that call on overused metaphors to characterise concrete objects or processes within cities and global economies. These simple generalisations generate "descriptive summaries of a given situation or extrapolations—rough predictions of what others might be like" (page 100). The net effect is for elites to highlight place properties that are "allegedly common to different societies at different times...dehistoricising their objects by giving a trans-historical, pan-cultural character to phenomena which are actually historically specific or culture-bound."

But whilst abstractions of this type are clearly visible in the development mantras of many cities, the fact that abstractions, in Sayer's terms, are derived as much from experiences and concrete contexts and circumstances as they are from mental rationalisations means that diverse *geographies of abstraction* emerge. Abstractions do not form in isolation, but circulate and/or are produced through existing social, political, and cultural conditions. Different abstractions, such as those describing globalisation, international competition, and cultural practices, therefore become shaped by a complex mix of place histories, economic change, and social–cultural dynamics. The assumption that decontextualised, neoliberal fast-policy transfers are becoming the dominant force in shaping urban policy agendas in all cities represents a crude abstraction that underplays the processes through which abstractions and meanings compete and jostle for legitimacy in particular places. They are a part, *but only a part*, of the relational engagements that exist between people and places forged over time across shifting political terrains. Thus, culture-led urban programmes can act as vehicles for global investment strategies, whilst at the same time playing broader roles in changing local political relations and shaping identities, cultural practices, and governmentalities. This is particularly the case for postcolonial cities and societies in which political and cultural freedoms had formerly been suppressed and in which 'globalisation' projects can be used, paradoxically, as a rallying point around which new claims and anti-neoliberal projects can be formed.

It is in light of this discussion that, in the remainder of the paper, we turn to one of the most significant cultural urban development projects in the world: the proposed transformation of the WKCD in Hong Kong. The research was conducted in 2009 and 2010 and involved a discourse analysis of development frameworks and policy texts, attendance at community engagement meetings, and twenty interviews with project managers, local policy makers, infrastructure providers, and cultural industry representatives. Its primary focus was to explore the specific abstractions that have been, and are being, constructed for and around the development ; and the ways in which spatial practices and representational spaces are conceived, imagined, governed, and contested. The discussion directly engages with how entrepreneurial strategies are producing new urban spaces and seeking to reshape cultural practices and post colonial identities in the city. We argue that there are also specific geographies to the processes of spatial production, with abstract representations drawing on locally embedded and politically contested mental rationalisations of Hong Kong's relational position vis-à-vis regional and global flows, and the process of cultural change, or becoming, in the city that throughout its history has been a contested space, governed at distance by political elites in London and then Beijing. The next section explores the relationships between cultural policy in the city and its colonial and postcolonial governance. This is followed by a discussion of contemporary urban politics, cultural policy, and development processes.

Characterising cultural policy in Hong Kong—from cultural desert to cultural city

"It is hardly conceivable that a Colony of any power except Britain could show such indifference to culture."

Harold Ingrams (Hong Kong letter, 1952; cited in Morris, 1997, page 64)

Before the British took control of Hong Kong in 1848, the city was a small fishing village on the eastern side of the Pearl River Delta. It rapidly became a strategically significant military entrepôt, that enabled European merchants to establish a lucrative opium trade with cities across southern China (see Welsh, 1997). Throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries it continued to grow by attracting migrants from Mainland China and became an archetypal colonial city, in which a British elite ruled over a predominantly Chinese population. For much of the Colonial period the authorities, therefore, did little to promote or discourage cultural policy in Hong Kong, and were happy to encourage social and cultural exchanges across the border.

In the postwar period this policy underwent gradual change. There was a growing fear that anticolonialist feelings might be stirred up as a spillover effect of the Civil War raging across the border in the mid-1940s (see Morris, 1997). According to Chui (1997), the colonial regime and its civil service therefore became much more active in the promotion of particular forms of cultural policy, as a means of extending and exerting political power. They appropriated cultural organisations and specific types of cultural practices in a highly selective way in order "to demonstrate the colonial regime's respect for local customs and culture … and relieved of the responsibility of providing social services in the opening years" (page 32). Relations were established with charitable organisations involved in the provision of social care, such as hospitals and schools, in an attempt to use cultural policy as a legitimation device for government. This enabled the British to use cultural policy as part of a divide-and-rule strategy and exploit the fact that the Chinese population was fractured along political and ethnic lines, lacked organisational capacity, and tended to be marginalised from formal political processes.[(2)]

One expression of this colonial attitude was the mobilisation of an abstraction of Hong Kong as a 'cultural desert', lacking formal cultural venues and a creative cultural spirit. Hong Kong was seen by elites as an industrial city whose cultural facilities and spaces compared poorly with those of its East and South East Asian rivals. Gradually, however, the British authorities began to invest in cultural infrastructure and commissioned the construction of City Hall in 1962 as part of a longer term series of piecemeal investments, culminating in the creation of the Hong Kong Arts Development Council to oversee cultural investments in 1997. But, as one interviewee with a long involvement in cultural policy recalled, the Colonial government had "a hesitant cultural policy" that was trying "to avoid issues of cultural identity, or what it might mean to be from Hong Kong … that explains the historical focus on building [Western-style] professional companies such as ballet, drama groups, dance companies, and a philharmonic orchestra." Or, as another pointed out, "if there was a cultural policy, it was to provide entertainment ... and to avoid issues around cultural identity and what is and what is not Hong Kong." The result, in the provocative words of one preindependence commentator, was that for much of the postwar period "by any reckoning it was a dismally Philistine colony" (Morris, 1997, page 64). As will be discussed below, this rather crude abstraction continues to influence policy perceptions and practices in the present

[(2)] As Chui's (1997) study shows, there were significant tensions within the migrant communities who poured into Hong Kong following the Chinese Civil War between the Kuomintang and the Communist Party supporters. This, in large part, limited the extent of collective organisation amongst the residents of the city.

day and was one of the impetuses behind the creation of the WKCD (see, for example, *Far Eastern Economic Review* 2007; Fitzpatrick, 2007).

The end of British rule in 1997 brought about a growing awareness within policy circles of the capacity of high culture to help create a new postindustrial image for Hong Kong that, in turn, would help to generate new forms of economic growth and, potentially, new forms of cultural identity and social cohesion.

The creation of new cultural urban spaces, it was argued, provided incentives for citizens and communities to be 'more creative' and globally oriented in outlook. This abstract reasoning also has to be understood in relation to a broader developmental ethos to governance, welfare, and planning policy in Hong Kong, and the propagation of what Wilding (2007, page 214) terms an 'economy-first' ideology. For both the pre-1997 and post-1997 administrations, economic development and expansion have been founded on the belief that "a strong economy is the best route to welfare ... [with] an ideology that social policy always comes second after the supposed needs of the economy" (page 214). Rather than just focusing on the education system, the construction of 'inspiring' new urban spaces could, therefore, play a key role in inculcating new modes of creative citizenship. Urban spaces were not to be a backdrop to individual and community action, but were to act as a key part in shaping the lived experiences of populations and their ways of viewing the world.

Economic growth has, therefore, traditionally fulfilled a broader cultural and political role in placating the growing tensions and threats to Hong Kong's social cohesion as inequalities between rich and poor relentlessly increase and dissatisfaction over the limited accountability of post-1997 governance arrangements grows.[3]

The limits of this policy have become increasingly apparent in the 2000s as the city's economic performance has fluctuated sharply. In the wake of three significant recessions, caused by the Asian financial crisis in 1997, SARS in 2003, and the global credit crunch in 2008, the government has looked to develop alternative economic sectors and strategies to promote new forms of social and economic resilience (see Raco and Street, 2012). A culture-led development policy seemed to provide just such an opportunity, particularly in a context where the civil service and technocratic elites continue to play a major role in governing and administering policy trajectories (see King, 1975; Lau, 1982). As Wong (2007) notes, the existence of such a powerful administrative apparatus is often used to replace or delay broader democratisation and directly accountable forms of policy making on the pretence that civil society remains in an underdeveloped, postcolonial state. In its place, quangos and executive boards are often established with their own ad hoc consultation procedures and ways of working that prioritise policy efficiency and delivery over governmental accountability. And yet, as will be discussed below, such bodies can also act as a platform for new modes of democratic engagement, with programmes that are constructed through a variety of conflicting mental rationalisation and abstractions.

In it is this broader context that the WKCD has emerged to dominate contemporary debates over cultural policy in the city and it is to its development that we now turn.

Abstractions of globalisation and place competitiveness: the emergence of the West Kowloon Cultural District

Changing urban politics and the construction of new cultural infrastructure

The WKCD is one of the most significant urban development projects in Asia and represents, in the words of one senior civil servant, an "unprecedented vision" for the city. The idea to pursue a large-scale cultural industries centre was originally conceived by the Hong Kong

[3] According to the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, Hong Kong's Gini coefficient in relation to incomes rose from 0.483 in 1996 to 0.500 in 2006, making it amongst the most unequal developed cities in the world (see Hong Kong Democratic Foundation, 2007).

Tourist Association (HKTA) two years after Hong Kong gained independence from British colonial rule:

> "We consider the proposed performance venue, a visionary piece of sustainable architectural wonder, to be one of the vital projects aimed at projecting a brave new global image of Hong Kong both in the form of its hardware as well as its software" (HKTA, 1999, page 5).

A cultural development was perceived to be the means through which Hong Kong could create a new postcolonial identity and a globally competitive city image.

Policy makers have sought to justify the development by reference to public, tourist, and investor 'opinion'. The HKTA published the results of a survey in 1996 that appeared to demonstrate the 'need' for a cultural venue. The colonial 'cultural desert' discourse was revived to justify the construction of new urban spaces, as was the desire to create what one interviewee claimed to be "an identifiable separate Hong Kong policy brand"—in the words of the Chief Secretary in 2003:

> "I believe the public also feel that compared with other advanced countries, we are lagging behind. Among our existing cultural facilities there may not be anything that we can be truly proud of ... no venues for HK artists to exchange ideas of creativity or where arts development can be fostered ... we can hardly make visitors feel that they must come back every year" (Legislative Council, 2003, page 1724).

For advocates, this policy will create spaces for growth in a sector that is significantly underrepresented locally but has become increasingly important to the success of other Asian competitors.

This overtly economic and hierarchical abstraction sees the creation of new urban environments as the basis for enhanced external recognition. This, in turn, will make the city more attractive to 'creative class' workers in global industries. As an officer noted in interview:

> "we have a vision to turn Hong Kong into an Asian international world city. We want international acknowledgement. We want people to talk about us, to remember us. Hong Kong's future is still as an international finance centre. But to be able to attract talent to HK, beside working 10 hours in a trading room, these guys do need to be able to go to concerts, they need to go to the theatre, they need to go to a musical … we have a vision that HK could be a city where you can live a life besides making money."

A strong cultural district is seen as an integral part of what will make a postcolonial Hong Kong 'different' from other rapidly expanding centres in China. As one respondent noted, "the booming of the Chinese economy in the next ten years will encourage more investors to come to this part of Asia so we need to be more competitive and attractive." And as a recent report in *The Economist* (2007) noted, skills shortages across Asia are creating new forms of competition between cities that are seeking to 'capture' talented workers and entrepreneurs.

Alongside this, the WKCD is also designed to create spaces for the globally focused cultural industries and to tap into broader flows of people and capital that currently pass Hong Kong by because of its 'failure' to provide the 'right' type of urban spaces and physical infrastructure. In the words of one project director, the district's international value will be critical to its success:

> "with that huge cultural district a lot of Chinese artists will be invited to come to Hong Kong and international artists …. WKCD will be one of the spots after Shanghai, after Beijing, and this is meant to be. But you still have to look at the holistic picture it is not only for Hong Kong … [it's] for Asia as well."

However, the project has been politically controversial. Its core features have not reflected the simple rolling out of a global neoliberal logic, but have emerged through conflict and debate between city authorities, cultural stakeholders, and protest groups, over: how the project should

be delivered; what its core aims and objectives should consist of; what cultural practices the new facilities should promote and support; and how it ties in with existing and earlier programmes and social policy agendas. As a consequence, there have been substantial delays to the project and, after more than a decade of planning, construction has still to begin on the West Kowloon site.

Initial discussions began in 1999 as the HKTA audited existing cultural facilities and examined the feasibility of developing an arts centre in Hong Kong:

> "Understandably, existing facilities and activities are focused to satisfy the local community first and foremost and as a result may lack the ingredients necessary to satisfy the international tourist market. Any type of event and any venue will require local support and interest to be successful but this local focus may go some way to explaining why only a fraction of those visitors expressing an interest in the performing arts actually attended arts or cultural events" (HKTA, 1999, page 5).

As a result of their survey, the HKTA put forward to the city's Legislative Council a proposal to build an international performance venue. It argued that such a development would not only house cultural facilities and venues, but would also integrate commercial and high-end residential facilities. Cultural policy and cultural outlooks should upscaled to become more global in outlook, with the WKCD acting as an international icon and "perceived as an attraction on its own, and be a major international landmark in Hong Kong" (HKTA, 1999, page 5). Consequently, an area of 40 ha located in the West Kowloon Reclamation Area (WKRA) strategically situated on the waterfront of Victoria Harbour, was recommended as the most desirable place to develop the landmark venue.

In 2001 the former Lands and Planning Bureau launched the West Kowloon Reclamation Concept Plan Competition, inviting architects to submit conceptual proposals for how the WKRA could be developed into an integrated arts centre. A total of 161 entries were submitted to a panel of 'cultural experts' and in 2002 it was announced that the winning entry was from Foster & Partners. As well as including several performance venues, a retail centre, commercial and residential facilities, a park, and a waterfront promenade; the Foster scheme also incorporated several striking architectural features (such as a canopy) that were viewed by the panel as essential to ensure that the development became an attraction in its own right and served as a symbol of Hong Kong's global-city status:

> "is a clear and deserving winner of the competition. The great canopy would create an unmistakeable landmark for Hong Kong. It would be a major tourist attraction. It would symbolise the community's vision of their city as a future centre of arts and culture, and realise that vision with great style" (Legislative Council on Planning, 2002).

The Legislative Council formed a Steering Committee, comprised of representatives from a range of governmental departments, to oversee the development of WKCD in line with the Foster & Partners conceptual plan. During 2003 the Steering Committee compiled a list of the core arts and cultural facilities that were reported to have been drawn from consultation with the cultural and arts community in Hong Kong. It also made a controversial decision that the project would be developed and governed by a single developer—the first time the private sector had been involved in the construction and management of an arts facility in Hong Kong. This developer-led model of delivery would, according to the Chairman, "optimise the WKCD Project to generate economic and employment opportunities in the present economic downturn" (Steering Committee, 2003, page 8).

However, once the detailed development plans were publicised, there soon followed much criticism from cultural stakeholders, as well as members of civil society and arts groups, with many complaints being submitted to the Legislative Council to be reviewed in their panel meetings. In particular, there was opposition to: the rationale behind the use of a single developer; the scale and cost of the project; the balance between the commercial,

residential, and cultural parts of the development; the types of events the venue was likely to host, with much concern that local artists would not be showcased; and the extent to which such a venue would foster local engagement and participation with the arts. Although there was support for developing a cultural district in Hong Kong, there was much concern over the transparency and accountability of the decision-making process underpinning the WKCD development. As one prominent critic argued in interview:

> "If you step back a bit, the idea of asking the developers to tender, asking the developers to manage this venue for the next twenty years is unheard of in HK and elsewhere in the world. For example, the programming of the cultural venue, how can you depend on the taste of the property developer to decide what to put in the museums?"

Or, as an officer involved in the early stages of the discussion recalled:

> "The first model was so wrong, you can't have a museum where the property developer has majority control, that doesn't work, that doesn't work anywhere. You could imagine that this could turn into a gated community."

Furthermore, the lack of involvement of the Legislative Council was apparent in many of their panel meetings, with one councillor admitting to not having adequate knowledge about the project and another highlighting that the core problem stalling the development of the WKCD was that the government has failed to conduct overall planning of the project from the user's point of view.

In a bid to address these concerns and to maintain the credibility of the WKCD development, the government launched a series of public consultation exercises during 2004 and 2005, further delaying construction at the site. A subcommittee on the WKCD was set up "to study and follow up issues relating to the development of the WKCD including its interface with arts and cultural development, land use and planning, environmental considerations, financing implications and arrangements, and other related matters" (WKCD Subcommittee, 2005, page 1). Hong Kong Polytechnic University was also commissioned by the Government to conduct a survey on the adequacy of the public engagement processes throughout the WKCD process (see PPRI, 2008). In response to these public engagement exercises, the government announced in early 2006 that they would no longer pursue the WKCD project under the single-developer model. For one interviewee this highlighted an exciting shift in the political context of Hong Kong where "civil society could actually change policies".

Moreover, a Consultative Committee (CC) and a Core Arts and Cultural Facilities Committee were also established to oversee the provision of cultural infrastructure. They recommended the formation of a quango body, the West Kowloon Cultural District Authority (WKCDA), to oversee the development (CC, 2008). A further three-month public engagement exercise was launched on the recommendations of the report, and the arts community on the whole agreed with the quango model of governance. Despite the traditions surrounding administrative governance in the city, the WKCDA represented the first executive body to include development professionals and cultural experts in project delivery. The WKCDA Ordinance was enacted by the Legislative Council on the 11 July 2008, with Section 20 stipulating the establishment of a consultation panel—the first time that consultation had become a statutory requirement in Hong Kong. Indeed, after the WKCDA board members were appointed in October 2008, yet another three-stage public engagement exercise was unveiled. This produced an enormous amount of data, from more than 6700 completed questionnaires, 198 written submissions, 96 Facebook posts, and 54 focus groups. The rationale for this, according to one organiser, was that since 1997 "Hong Kong people are running Hong Kong … and you have to go through a lot of public consultation", with respondents asked to envisage what the WKCD will look like in the future and what they

expect and want from the development.[4] This 'pendulum change' in the development politics of the city, it was argued, would encourage architects and planners to adapt their plans for the site and embed their abstract representations of space in the lived and perceived experiences and needs of local communities.

Following this protracted consultation (that was completed in January 2010) three architectural firms (Foster & Partners, the Office for Metropolitan Architecture, and Rocco Design Architects Ltd) were retained to develop a new conceptual plan for the WKCD based on the findings from the first stage of public engagement. Once these conceptual plans had been submitted to the WKCDA, the new authority began the second stage of consultation by showcasing the three conceptual plans to the public in August 2010. On the basis of feedback gained, the project was awarded to Foster & Partners in March 2011—ten years after they had won the original project (*The Guardian* 2011). Remarkably a further, final, stage of public engagement will see Foster & Partners construct a more specific development plan that will, again, be scrutinised by the public. Once this stage is complete, the WCKDA will finalise the detailed development plan for submission to the Town and Planning Board for consideration.

Such visions, however, characterise the city's communities and individuals in specific ways and represent a continuity in local political thinking. Community-based critics, argued in interview that the WKCD represents the continuation of a colonial cultural policy as a way of placating the city's diverse community groups. As one community arts group leader commented, the WKCD will deliberately "not use community art as a galvanising force to empower people to think about their identities to come to grips with various changes." Any 'radical' policy would run counter the city's established 'economy-first' approach to social policy.

At the same time, however, the WKCD is part of a wider agenda to develop 'an abstraction of difference' between Hong Kong and other, more authoritarian, cities in South East Asia, such as Singapore and Shanghai, where development has taken place at rapid speed, but with little recourse to community consultation or engagement. This is often presented as being in distinction to the 'inefficiencies' associated with more democratic forms of political engagement. Senior policy makers suggested, in interview, that the WKCD therefore had to be seen to be successful in Hong Kong to 'prove' that more democratic forms of planning and decision making have the potential to enable, rather than constrain, the creation of more embedded forms of urban development. In the wake of China's imposed post-1997 governance reforms, the city does not have a fully fledged democratic system in place and this has been an ongoing source of political conflict. Projects such as the WKCD have, therefore, taken on a symbolic importance as they represent a principal avenue through which local views and perspectives on the city's future can be expressed. They are part of a broader tentative shift towards the introduction of a sustainability agenda in the city's planning, consisting of consultative, participatory mechanisms of decision making that differ both from the earlier British system that had been dominated by powerful networks of civil servants and property developers and the Chinese system of top-down, state-led urban planning.

This wider politics of contested abstractions also explains how and why the WKCD has been presented through metaphors as both a technical–rational and a culturally sensitive project. Thus there is a distinction made between the so-called 'hardware' and 'software' of the development. The former consists of the physical urban spaces that are required to enable cultural industries to flourish. The latter refers to the cultural activities and practices that will take place within the new spaces and how these will generate desired changes within

[4] Its official purpose was to "encapsulate the views, expectations and aspirations of the public as well as stakeholders in the arts and cultural and other relevant sectors for the planning of the District" (WKCDA, 2010, page 1).

populations and communities. Other respondents talked of the governance arrangements as an "*operating system* or the system software" that enables all the different components of the project to be managed, integrated, and organised. The logic of such abstractions is to challenge the widespread perception that Hong Kong's development politics is overly concerned with the building of infrastructure. As one planning officer put it, the government "borrowed the hardware/software concept to tell people of the importance of the content." Whilst similar metaphors are used in development projects elsewhere, they take on a particular significance in Hong Kong because of the city's perceived historical neglect of nonphysical forms of development. The discussion is not only about the construction of new urban spaces, but also about their symbolic power and their role in forging postcolonial identities. Given this wider context, the paper now explores the governance arrangements that have been put in place to deliver the project and the tensions and complexities that project managers and policy makers have faced.

The governance of culture-led urban policy in Hong Kong

The governance dynamics surrounding the implementation of the WKCD reflect local social relations and the specific development politics of the city. Policy makers have sought to reconcile competing objectives whilst working within a complex political system made up of a mix of colonial and posthandover institutional structures. One important legacy, for example, is that the government owns all the land in Hong Kong and facilitates development through the provision of 99-year leases. This has traditionally fuelled the growth of enormous-scale urban development projects, funded by global and local property investors (see Welsh, 1997). Through the establishment of the WKDCA, the government is attempting to create greater distance between itself and the awarding of development contracts—in part, to be seen to be more as 'democratic' and engaged with a newly 'liberated' citizenry. It is for this reason that policy makers have adopted the more traditional 'Hong Kong model' of administrative governance and established new quango bodies to oversee the development. When the WKCDA was established in 2008 (see earlier discussion), it was given a budget of HK$21.6 billion (US$2.8 billion) to determine how the buildings and infrastructure should be constructed, and what types of cultural activities should be located in them.

The authority is staffed by experts from different sectors and it was established explicitly to establish 'trust' in the development process between developers, local communities, and cultural industries.

It was, therefore, in the words of one senior civil servant seen as "more democratic than having the government run it" as it would overcome a perceived "trust deficit" in government. Its creation represented a process of "corporatisation rather than privatisation", with the role of private developers checked by a combination of the WKCDA, formal government agencies, arts and cultural industry bodies, and civil society groups. In line with similar agencies elsewhere, its task was seen by development experts within it as 'nonpolitical', as "the infrastructure thing is more easy for us … we can just concentrate on the building." Or, as one its officers claimed, "we are not civil servants, we can set up our own procedures, we do not follow all government procedures." Moreover, it is an organisation that has to be seen to be acting democratically for external audiences, so that some of Hong Kong's elites can demonstrate their 'democratic credentials' to competitors, international organisations, and potential investors. This form of place competition may serve to boost local engagement, rather than shut it out.

Thus, in the context of Hong Kong's politics, government is elided with proceduralism and relatively low levels of democratic accountability. Nongovernmental agencies, in contrast, are characterised as being dynamic, flexible, and better engaged with a greater diversity of interests and communities. This is particularly relevant to cultural policy for,

as one critic argued in interview, "the colonial government made a big impact on the city's bureaucrats … a mindset that emphasises highbrow art and places a lower priority on local, community, and indigenous art; a narrow interpretation of cultural policy." The creation of the WKCDA provides one platform through which these administrative–technical structures of governance can and are being challenged. It has provided a focus for the mobilisation of other demands and agendas from Hong Kong's social actors. For example, in interview some community activists have challenged the WKCD as an elitist and fundamentally Westernised development that has been imposed on the city at the expense of local community projects. As one noted:

> "we observed from the beginning that the project itself, the main area, is mainly a showcase for international events, not for young people here in Hong Kong ... . But in Hong Kong the government has spent a lot of money on borrowing or buying some Western art to exhibit, not for the Hong Kong people. It is just to let tourists know that we are a cosmopolitan city ... most people think that it is not for us but is mainly for people visiting from mainland China."

Or, as another pointed out, the WKCD may have a detrimental effect on local cultural activities if it draws away investment and attention from local community-based artistic education:

> "of course we need a showcase area...but we in arts education also need to be included in this area for it to have a wider impact."

Critics have also mobilised economic arguments against the development, with some arguing that Hong Kong's population will not be able to provide sufficient support for (commercial) cultural activities as there is relatively little teaching of cultural activities in the education system. This, it is argued, threatens the viability of cultural projects in the city as, in the words of one community activist:

> "there will be up to 30 000 seats to fill every night and you can't rely on tourists to fill those seats. You must get the ordinary person interested in the arts and culture and you must make sure they are willing audiences ... otherwise it will be labelled as a failure, a big white elephant. So it is important to get the community involved."

And yet elements within Hong Kong have been vocal critics of the development plans and have played a key part in their reform and evolution. Local activists, for example, set up the People's Panel on West Kowloon in 2005 to oppose the development plans as they then stood. As one of the panel's letters to the HK Executive stated, the WKCD "must have cultural substance ... . Without that it could still become just a development project ... a failed cultural project" (PPWK, 2005, page 1). By making the development "democratic, participative and inclusive", it was argued, it could play a broader role in shaping an urban planning vision for the whole city. Criticism of the WKCD as an elitist, property-led development went beyond the activities of a small number of groups and represented what one government official called "the first big mobilisation of Hong Kong's civil society over urban development in the city post-1997." Or, in the words of one of the original developers, the earlier plans for the site were rejected because "politics got involved": that is, a series of local demands were articulated that challenged the core assumptions underpinning the proposals by using alternative forms of abstraction about the city, culture, and the development of urban space. In essence, in the words of one activist:

> "it was safe to invest in hardware facilities because it is always right, and it also fits the cultural industries discussion from overseas and the cultural tourism discussion ... that is why we were so against the original plans because they tried to avoid the content and we need to put the content first ... that was why they stopped the development and set up a consultative panel."

This contestation was a key element in the WKDA's rejection of the initial plans and the subsequent modification and changes that have taken place. As one politician noted in interview, the project is

> "no longer developer-led ... it is now government led ... . There is more accountability ... and it [aims to] develop a new model of governance and engagement, education and participatory management."

For the executive it plays a key strategic role that will enable Hong Kong to act as

> "an important channel of communication between China and the world due to its unique historical background and geographical position ... it should position itself as a metropolis in China which is most capable of bridging China and the world."

It also reflects the wider principle that "Hong Kong people's cultural identity should start from local culture, be grounded in Chinese cultural traditions and possess a global vision" (Hong Kong Home Affairs Bureau, 2005, pages 1–2). This language was reflected in the comments of contemporary interviewees in the WKCDA, who argued that

> "the building of facilities will enable local residents to have local opportunities to use the facilities for cultural programmes and the facilities can help them a lot in seeing programmes from overseas."

Or, in the words of one senior politician, WKCD was a key building block of a "cosmopolitan agenda in the city" with Hong Kong "fulfilling a role as a unique Chinese city where East meets West." Whilst such repeated phrases have become rather clichéd, they do hint at the power of what one arts group leader in Kowloon referred to as his community's "transitional identities" between pre-2007 and post-2007, or the creative tension of "being Chinese but not being totally Chinese." Interviewees from different sides of the cultural and development sectors all highlighted the city's 'uniqueness' in this respect and the implications of this as a potential springboard for a revived cultural policy in the city.

This, in turn, reflects broader political debates within the city over its relations with Beijing and its status as a Special Administrative Region. For pro-democracy activists a distinct cultural policy, underpinned by urban development projects, represents one of the key vehicles for the formation of a distinct set of identities and practices in Hong Kong. In the longer term it is hoped that this will propagate enhanced political dissonance between the Chinese one-party system of governance and a more open, tolerant, democratic, Hong Kong-based polity. Cultural and education policy will be a key battleground between different systems of social organisation, citizenship, and outlooks. For Chinese nationalists, however, cultural policy offers new opportunities for the Sinicisation of Hong Kong. The WKCD could, in this reading, be used to promote forms of 'Chinese' cultural practices, whilst embedding the city more firmly into the economic and social geographies of southern China. For example, Kowloon will be connected by a high-speed rail link and the existence of the district could act as a draw for Chinese tourists, visitors, and migrants.

As of 2011 the WKCD development is still very much going ahead and debates over a new Museum complex (named M+) and the precise makeup of the cultural facilities are continuing to be aired. There is also discussion over the role that residential development will play in financing the project and the types of buildings that will be created. It seems that in the short to medium term the development will do little to tackle the city's inequalities and may even exacerbate them. In the longer term, however, its impacts on urban cultures, ways of living, and modes of governance may be more profound as the project has come to represent a key symbol of social and political struggles in the postcolonial city.

In summary, the discussion has used the case of the WKCD to examine how and why particular rationalities of urban development emerged in Hong Kong. It has drawn on research carried out at a key moment in the development process in which decisions are being rolled

out and contested by a range of interests, working to different agendas and priorities. The decision to build one of the largest designated 'cultural districts' in Asia was taken for a variety of reasons, some of which conform to 'entrepreneurial' political projects but many of which do not. These include: a desire on the part of political and economic elites to recapitalise a reclaimed development site in the heart of the Hong Kong territories; the influence of dominant historically embedded abstractions that present precolonial and postcolonial Hong Kong as a place 'lacking' in cultural facilities and high culture; the existence of specific conceptions of regional place competition that are not just about economic advantage but also concern different models of governance and project delivery; the role of the state and its position vis-à-vis project delivery and practices of democratic engagement; and debates over the place and placing of culture in relation to broader policy a wider debate over education policy, social conflict, relations with mainland China, and the formation of distinct and unifying local identities. In short, whilst, clearly, one of the core logics contained within the plans has been to facilitate investment and 'globalise' the city's cultural sector, the politics of development has also been embedded in the complex postcolonial social and political relations in and beyond the city. This has wider implications for understandings of urban entrepreneurialism and neoliberalisation elsewhere and it is to these that the final section now turns.

Abstract formation and the limits of neoliberalisation

The discussion above has used the example of the WKCD and the politics of culture-led urban development in Hong Kong to explore and assess the form and character of contemporary entrepreneurial culture-led urban policy, the abstractions that shape interventions, and the processes of globalisation and territorial competition in which they occur. We have argued against approaches that reduce local social relations to a "residual effect of more fundamental political–economic rationalities" (Barnett, 2011, page 269). Instead, we have explored the contextualised abstractions of culture-led urban policy that have emerged in the city and the ways in which these have become bound up with a complex politics of postcolonialism, citizenship, bureaucratic practices, and place competition.

Following Sayer (1992), we have examined the political processes through which abstractions are formed and are *recursively related to the specific concrete circumstances in which they emerge*. In the case of urban entrepreneurial agendas these abstractions are only *in part* developed from neoliberal logics. In other words, there needs to be a greater emphasis, conceptually and methodologically, on how it is that concrete relations *shape* abstractions, and less of an assumption that the former are a residual effect of the latter. It is a crude exaggeration to argue that, in the case of Hong Kong, capitalist modernity "has rendered places into inconveniences in the path of progress to be dispensed with, whether by erasure or by rendering them into commodities" (Dirlik, 2001, page 42). Or that "homogeneous abstract space manifests itself as a dislocated and dismembered landscape of capitalism, a global space" (Merrifield, 2006, page 112). To 'read off' development projects in this way carries the risk of imposing new forms of Eurocentric intellectual condescension on what are, in reality, vigorous local political debates over Hong Kong's democratic future, the identities that exist amongst its citizens, and its geopolitical role in the world and within China. This, in turn, has implications for understandings of neoliberalism and neoliberalisation that have come to dominate much of the literature on urban politics.

First, it indicates that the politics of place competition does not *necessarily* reflect the deadening influence of a zero-sum game of capitalist competition for investment and creative workers, even though this is often an important element in the propagation of any development agenda. Alongside this, place competition can also involve the mobilisation of a politics of

differentiation in which the development of new urban spaces becomes symbolic of broader changes and can act as a catalyst for discontents over, for example, existing democratic practices and/or cultural attachments and representations. The literature on neoliberalisation makes a series of predictions that are only partly reflected (if at all) in Hong Kong. It claims that states relinquish authority and control over development to global investors. But in Hong Kong (and West Kowloon), the state continues to own all land and to determine what should be done with it. It further predicts that 'the social' and 'the political' will become subservient to economic logics, and in so doing ignores the complex and contradictory politics of development and contestation that have shaped development projects in this city and elsewhere. It assumes that a 'creative-class agenda' is being rolled out as a form of policy transfer from the West. And yet, as discussed above, this forms only a part of a much wider set of development logics and has, in fact, become less important over time compared with debates over the relationships between new urban spaces, identity formation, and the city's political future. In short, many of the predictions embedded in political–economic writings on urban politics are simply not born out in this case study. And yet, the inevitable recourse to 'neoliberalisation as a process, not a thing' found in such work (see Peck et al, 2010; England and Ward, 2007; Wacquant, 2008) creates a set of unfalsifiable claims that seek to 'read off' contemporary urbanism as a manifestation of hegemonic neoliberal abstractions and rationalities, whilst simultaneously seeing differences between places as evidence that neoliberalism is not hegemonic. It fails to put a clear boundary around 'the neoliberal', and defines politics as being on a path to neoliberalisation—even though its core elements may not actually be found.

Second, in methodological terms, it is essential that researchers adopt more robust and geographically sensitive modes of enquiry that examine the connections between political projects and the processes involved in the formation of abstractions. All too often, the term 'abstraction' is elided with the 'global' or with top-down formations that misrepresent their character and underplay the geographies associated with both 'mental rationalisations' and with 'sensory experiences of the world' (cf Sayer, 1992) that differ markedly in different cultural and historical circumstances. Abstractions therefore relate to specifically local circumstances and contexts that shape what policy options are available. This includes, for example, the ownership of land, planning regimes, land-use change, demographic pressures, and environmental limits. To argue that abstractions have little connection with such circumstances and options is to understate the importance of diverse constellations of geographically differentiated influences—specificities that directly shape the rolling out of urban entrepreneurial projects that, consequently, take on diverse forms in different contexts.

And third, we also discussed the relationships between urban cultures and policy agendas. It has been argued that cultural meanings and representations are particularly difficult to 'fix' in relation to urban development projects and cannot be reduced to concrete debates over the 'creative industries' and 'creative classes'. In cities such as Hong Kong, contemporary understandings of culture reflect and reproduce the city's Colonial history and the complex interactions between governing elites, urban communities, and dominant representations of culture—both as a tool of social control and as a vehicle of citizenship empowerment. Research should not overstate the ability of urban entrepreneurial programmes to bring order to this 'messiness' and should instead emphasise the recursive relationships between urban cultural politics and the final forms that concrete development projects take.

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