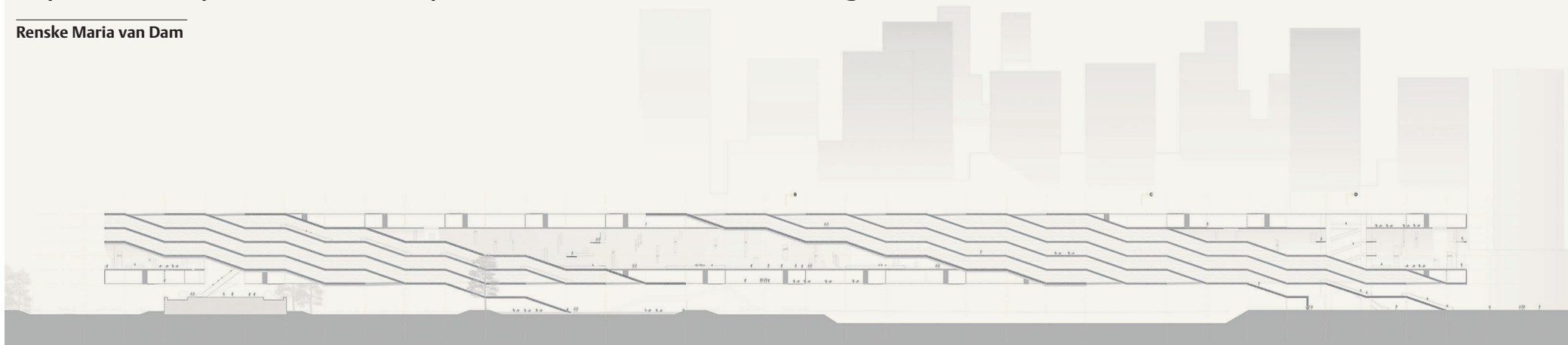


# Learning from Hong Kong: 'place' as relation

The Hong Kong-China border is slowly dissolving. In 2010 a part of the frontier area at Lok Ma Chau opened up for new urban developments. By 2047, 50 years after the 1997 handover of Hong Kong to China, the border will no longer exist. This project proposes an inhabited bridge at Lok Ma Chau, connecting Hong Kong and Shenzhen, that recognises both the global movement within the Pearl River Delta as well as the local sense of 'place'. In an attempt to learn from Hong Kong I ask: What makes place in Hong Kong valuable? What is the influence of globalisation on the local experience of place other than 'placelessness'? And how as designers can we work with this?

Renske Maria van Dam



Above: Cross section of the inhabited bridge connecting Hong Kong (left) and Shenzhen (right).

Below: Model pictures of the three atmospheres.

## Placelessness

The Pearl River Delta is characterised by the intense movement between cultural, political and environmental differences. Due to Hong Kong's history as a British colony and its recent transformation into one of the most important global urban agglomerations connecting Eastern and Western economies, the Pearl River Delta has become a space of transit. At Lok Ma Chau this is clearly visible in the urban fabric. The landscape is dominated by huge infrastructural elements that facilitate the transit between Hong Kong's wealthy economy, with its beautiful wetlands along the borderland, and China's cheap labour industry with standardised high rises.

In contemporary urban theory this sense of movement, the result of the parallel existence of differences, is often understood as a problem rather than a quality, resulting in the experience of 'placelessness'. In this theory, the movement and the clash of differences are reflected in an accumulation and intersection of parallel urban atmospheres that prevent a local sense of place. As a reaction to this general shunning of place the question of a new sense of place arises. This often leads to a nostalgic desire for a traditional sense of place that is still visible in some historical villages, suggesting that the emergence of the modern metropolis has been a mistake.

But, in contradiction to contemporary urban theory, 'place' in Hong Kong is valuable. Not only in an absolute sense, reflected in the high land-prices, but also in an emotional sense as acknowledged by its visitors and inhabitants. In Hong Kong there is, despite the movement and differences, a possibility to experience what I call: a sense of *place within movement*.

## Place as relation

To understand the valuable sense of *place within movement* in Hong Kong, place has to be valued as a dynamic intangible singularity rather than as tangible object or reified identity. In other words place should be understood as relation.

A juxtaposition of Western and Eastern conceptions of space helped formulate this conclusion. Whereas Western place-conceptions are formed on object-based networks, the Eastern conception of place is based on relationality through movement manifested in the use of voids. One of the most helpful concepts to understand this quality of place, as a dynamic intangible relationship, is the Chinese *bagua*. The *bagua* are eight 'trigrams' (symbols comprising three parallel lines, either 'broken' or 'unbroken', representing yin or yang respectively – signifying the relationships between the five elements: wood, fire, earth, metal, and water), which are often portrayed around a centrally placed yin-yang symbol, believed to have a void in its middle. This void is not empty, but filled with energy; relational movement between the elements. The *bagua* can be used as a 'map' to align all the elements in, for example, a house. The traditional Chinese courtyard is also an exemplary manifestation of this philosophy.

Thus the seemingly problematic context of movement and differences has potential. Hong Kong cannot be described by differences such as east or west, tradition or modernity, global or local, but the valuable Hong Kong place experience is one in which the differences between its parts cause a delicate and sensitive relationship and therefore a new sense of place; a sense of *place within movement*.

## Personages

If place is understood as relation, as designers we not only have to engage with the physical qualities of place, but we also have to engage with the intangible qualities of place. We have to design for resonance. Resonance can be understood as emotional 'vibration' that is achieved by stimulation of latent experiences. Where the embodied experience of touching ice might cause a temporary cold feeling in your fingertips, the emotional response, the resonance, may be formed by means of transversal association; for example, previous personal or culturally based experiences, or even future dreams. Just like music instruments that, without being touched, vibrate in sympathy with another instrument being played at that moment; we too interact with our environment in this way.

To include latent experiences into the design process, I developed five personages, based on associative questionnaires taken with the potential future users. In short: 1) a school child living in Shenzhen and who crosses the border twice every day to go to school; 2) a businessman living in Hong Kong and who crosses the border at least twice a week to do business in the Pearl River Delta; 3) a migrant who crosses the border only during Chinese holidays to visit his family still in China; 4) a tourist who crosses the border for leisure purposes to see the Hong Kong cultural highlights; 5) a local living in the frontier area, who currently never crosses the border, but who might find a job in the developing borderland eco-tourism in the future. These personages inspired a design of three atmospheres (see below) that, defined by kinaesthetic differences, engage with a relational void, global and local program and the surroundings of the borderland.

## Atmospheres

An atmosphere is a strong potential of a place that can influence one's feelings and is achieved by carefully designing for all the senses. Just like specific colours in paintings will stimulate specific emotions, the use of specific architectural elements will stimulate the experience of specific atmospheres.

The first atmosphere is inspired by the fast economic connection between Hong Kong and China and facilitates the users who will cross the border on a daily basis or visit for shopping. The energy is directive and commercially oriented. The second atmosphere is inspired by the leisurely connection

between Hong Kong and China. It facilitates the users who wander around the region visiting various kinds of tourist facilities. The energy is associative and educationally oriented. This atmosphere houses tourist information points and a historical museum. The third atmosphere is inspired by the local landscape and is designed as a place to enjoy nature and relax. It facilitates a natural walking route and the offices related to the border-control function.

## Bridge in difference

The final design is for an inhabited bridge based on these three atmospheres that swirl through and around a long 'void' that literary and symbolically connects Hong Kong and China. This relational void, as inspired by the ancient Chinese *bagua*, links the atmospheres to each other and to the surrounding landscape.

The quality of the relational void is further developed in the inner and outer façades. The rhythm of the inner void interacts with the rhythm of the outer routes in such a way that the experience of place within movement is further stimulated by the effect of anamorphosis. And the swirl of the outer routes takes the *bagua* concept literary by turning the experience of its architectural elements upside-down; roof becomes façade becomes floor. In this way, what might be valuable (a specific view or experience) for one person, might be insignificant for others. Thus, by means of different speeds and purposes the bridge will become place and movement simultaneously. The Lok Ma Chau bridge therefore becomes a place to not only move through, but also to go to, and thus provides a sense of *place within movement*.

## Learning from Hong Kong

Hong Kong inspired me to understand 'place' as relation instead of object. This opened up my thinking towards a different understanding of architecture. It also encouraged me to enrich my approach to design from a very rational, pre-determined design process to an open-ended one, based on trial and error. This project gave me the chance to work with a concept that is, in my opinion, highly valuable for contemporary society: an understanding of place as relation. It is my aim to develop this understanding of place and resonance in future research and design, since there is still much more to learn from Hong Kong.

Renske Maria van Dam is currently working as an architect for her own atelier SPICES and as researcher at ALEPH (autonomous laboratory for exploration of progressive heuristics currently residing at the Royal Academy of Arts, the Hague) where she is preparing a PhD project on 'the mechanism of non-local resonance in the experience and design of place'. (renskemaria@gmail.com)

