SOLOMON BENJAMIN & WING SHING TANG
FRAMING SPATIAL STORIES: LIFE BEYOND THE PLAN SURVEY AND GRID
Solomon Benjamin and Wing Shing Tang, Hong Kong and Bangalore-based scholars of critical geography and urban studies led a set of workshops and walks in *Framing Spatial Stories: Life Beyond the Plan, Survey, and Grid* to consider the politics of contested urban settings through the lens of recent art of Asia.

**Solomon Benjamin and Wing Shing Tang**  
**Framing Spatial Stories: Life Beyond the Plan, Survey, and Grid**  
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PROPOSITIONS TO UNFREEZING CITY-LIFE
Fig. 2. Wanchai as the sources of spatial contradiction.
AAA Sites Practiced City Spaces as Critical Art Practice:
- Being ‘Urban’ when cartographic logics as a dialectics /disrupted by Political Spaces
- Multi-layered density that challenges the fixity of law and property
- Movement of Political experience materializes the city into a political act
- Politics as an everyday archive
- Property being ‘de-naturalized’

YinYang of Sites:
Sites in HK {British Side} & Sites in Kowloon {Chinese Side}
2 - Groups of YingYang of Groups:
3 ‘Arts’ & 1 Social Sci. {Geography}
1. The Question

2. Materialising Spatial Stories

3: The Sites: Wedding Card Street and Langham Place, Wan Chai

4: Five Propositions – Constituent Elements of Art Practice Co-produced with Urban Spatialised Stories
   . Proposition 1: Beyond Cartographic Representations
   . Proposition 2: Economic Space as a Practiced Everyday Politics
   . Proposition 3: Recover Spaces of Administrative and Political Debates Within and Outside Legislative Councils: Take Seriously the Politics of Planning Gain Related Regulations
   . Proposition 4: Re-Occupy and Re-Embed Law: In the Realm of Practices of Hawking Specifications, Licences, and Oil Street Explorations
   . Proposition 5: Recovering Collective Memory via Spatialised Story Building Narrative of a Place but Not as a Containment of Space or from Photographic Nostalgia

5. Some Continuing Conversations Around the Five Propositions
1. The Question

Can criticality in art practice and human geography co-produce new ways of thinking about cities beyond their particular disciplines? Furthermore, what are the various ways that such criticality is premised on the spatiality of material processes?

The Impossibility of Complete(d) Representation

We’ve been exploring these questions in the context of two sites in Hong Kong and Kowloon, albeit in a preliminary way. Our observations and discussions with artists and political activists leads us to conclude that such engagement turns substantively when practised space as critical art becomes life itself. Second, we cannot assume that art practice can completely represent political space, and seek to replace it. This is in part, due to the complex non-linearity and constant flux of political space. What critical art practice can hope to do is to provide the artist, the audience a sense and glimpse of the political – explicitly or by way of metaphor and at times stirring memories. Which is not a bad idea or a minor feat – as evidenced in the footpaths as imaged above.

An important point here is that we recognise this realm as not in an oppositional one to that of explicit protest. The accompanying images of ‘Occupy’ would on closer inspection underpin a complexity. Instead, we aim to explore via our title ‘Framing Spatial Stories: Life Beyond the Plan, Survey, and Grid’ ways to think about law and territory as these shape critical art practice. As discussed later in this note, our approach allows us to explore to what extent and ways by which realms of administration and planning may politicise common people since these intervene to shape everyday experiences of urban renewal.

The other conclusion of our engagement over some months with this issue is that the realms of the political urban are varied including those of law and administration. Like many other realms these move beyond cartographic logics. The serious risk here is, that not only is there the difficulty of representation but also whether art practice becomes an instrument of de-politicisation, a hegemony that serves
the purpose of large capital. While most explicitly this is witnessed in the massive bronze sculptures that abound the landscaping of urban renewal projects this also includes the strongly cartographic visual plans that serve their part in the technical rationality shaping these massive interventions. If one is questioning such realms set within planning bureaucracies, than equally, as witnessed in one of our sites Langham Place, and another Oil Street renewal as another, a vital material to weave into critical art practice is the bureaucratic and legal paperwork that shape the politics of space. This calls for a very different form of archiving that the AAA office in Fotan has begun very productively and opens up new possibilities beyond the more self-referential approaches. This realm of politics (and its aesthetics) is very different than what is possible in more conventional acts of explicit mass social ‘movements’ that Hong Kong-Kowloon has been the site of. But even these have an embedded history, which requires a quiet engagement and working through to make sense of.

Finally, in our journey exploring these questions we’ve come to critique the more official positions of ‘heritage’. This is not just an issue of ‘authenticity’ – as that’s a slippery slope and seeking out the original. The issue here is a political one: Is a necessarily turbulent memory that interconnects groups across time and space replaced by various cartographic and legal logics an individualised ‘nostalgia’ which forms the basis for a projectification in the most literal sense? We see here a particular violence in this nostalgia – of an erasure of a collective space and of distinctive materiality reflecting lived experiences. It’s hardly surprising that the realm of heritage-nostalgia-conservation aim to contain such politics by deploying a sensory aesthetics that deceives and is also aimed to narrow and massage memory into forgetfulness.

Our Approach and this Dossier:

Our engagement in this project started out with the two of us as critical geographers as a way to put together material, as well as a particular history of Hong Kong Island and Kowloon sites, and use that to bring together for artists and social scientists to jointly explore these in a grounded way. This was to include intensive site
walks followed by a workshop. What the project turned out to be was more of a way for us to frame a proposition for a nuanced critical art practice. This gave primacy to Tang’s ‘Materialising Spatial Stories’ (Tang 2009) to emerge from a perspective of ‘cityness’ (Malik 2010), and set within a nuanced and contextual understanding of Chinese land history (Tang 2014) and via layered forms of tenure occupancy (Benjamin 2008/2014). The last forms an entry to include the realms and practises that inhabit law. Such co-production in art and urban politics opened several intersecting realms – but also without necessarily a definitive closure. Thus this dossier necessarily gives form to research and working processes, and as noted by AAA Researcher Michelle Wong it is by no means a definitive or final representation of the project or process. Rather it operates as a space/platform exploring an articulation, and with the materiality among more subtle and often invisible spaces that create at times (but not necessarily always or even often) convergence between an art and art-archive practice and one form of critical urban geography practice.

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Census instrument of capital co-joined with parts of the state: Survey & questionnaires

Classical ethnography as linage of the area studies: Oral History & Life Story as exploring and exposing the natives

Radicalising space: Spatial Stories

Pedagogy: Focus on the process! Rather than an absolute final product driven by logics of form-aesthetics; Explore metaphors, symbolics

- Facts on households
- People’s needs
- Opinions on renewal

- Individual’s stories
- Social networks
- Lives in a place over time
- Cartographic representations

- Social relations
- Politics of place
- Diversity, complexities
- Processes
Please visit aaa.org.hk to read more on related research from this project
依法賠償七年樓
喜帖行業不可煙滅
保留社區網
參與齊規劃
民參與規
COMPENSATION AS PROMISED (7 YEARS FLAT)
COMPENSATION! SAME DISTRICT RESSETLEMENT
EXCHANGE AS PROMISED

一条印刷街，落实铺换铺
Framing Spatial Stories:  
Life Beyond the Plan, Survey, and Grid

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Asia Art Archive marks its 15th year by extending 15 Invitations to creative practitioners to look within and beyond the organisation as an archive, a collection of material, a digital platform, and a node in a wider collective network. 15 Invitations take various sizes, forms, and creative directions—literary, polemic, political, sonic, physical, and digital—and function as a series of ‘drop pins’ to alternatively navigate where AAA originated and where it may be going. AAA’s e-journal Field Notes traces the 15 participants as they contribute notes and entries to document the process.

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