

EXPERIMENTAL COMMUNITY DESIGN STUDIO IN HONG KONG

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COPING WITH A RAPIDLY CHANGING NEIGHBOURHOOD

Sai Ying Pun is one of many typical old neighbourhoods in Hong Kong that has witnessed an urban transformation in the last few decades. Fuelled by the arrival of a new MTR station, modern high-rises shot up in the historic grid of traditional shophouses. Typical mum-and-pop shops were replaced by hip cafés and bars, bringing in a new wave of residents and tourists. Rents went up, and within 10 years the socio-economic status of the neighbourhood had completely changed. Many of the old residents didn't realise how precious the character of their neighbourhood was until it was changed beyond recognition; how valuable their public space was until it was eaten up by new developments. This neighbourhood sentiment is what triggered this community-led public space initiative.

COMMUNITY DESIGN STUDIO AS SOCIAL ANCHOR

Caritas Mok Cheung Sui Kun Community Centre ('Caritas'), a local NGO with a long-standing history in Hong Kong, started a series of activities in Sai Ying Pun in 2012. Their location of choice was Centre Street, a long and steep slope typical of the neighbourhood. With financial assistance from the Urban Renewal Fund, Caritas spearheaded the organisation of a variety of activities to connect the original residents in a time of rapid urban change: street markets, outdoor movie screenings, pop-up street furniture and even Christmas carolling. A few years of experiments yielded an overwhelmingly positive response, and a clear conclusion: local residents wanted a community hub where they could gather without having to worry about the weather or government permits. This planted the seed of what became the Magic Lane Community Design Studio ('Magic Lanes').

The originators agreed that Magic Lanes should act as an anchor to channel residents' sensitivities and to recover their sense of belonging and identity as Sai Ying Pun-ers. Most importantly, it needed to be a comfortable, homey place to re-imagine the future of the neighbourhood. Ideally, not a fluid or temporary pop-up, but a permanent and shaded space, like a street-level shop space.



Fortunately, they managed to convince the Urban Renewal Fund to commit to renting a space in Hong Kong's skyrocketing property market. In their search, they stumbled upon a small vacant shop in Sheung Fung Lane, a steep alley with busy pedestrian traffic and a high percentage of locals. As an added bonus, Sheung Fung Lane was a privately-owned thoroughfare, eliminating the need to deal with government bureaucracy.



They were able to rent the space for a period of two years and opened the Magic Lanes Design Studio in March 2017. The first project they embarked on was a community-led process to re-design the Sheung Fung Lane. Visualising and articulating the residents' needs and demands in an actual physical project was an empowering and energising process.

LESSONS LEARNED

Two years into the project, the Caritas team is ready to share three key lessons:

1. **Balancing rights & responsibilities of different stakeholders.**

Sheung Fung Lane is a privately-owned laneway, yet it is publicly accessible and used by hundreds of residents and commuters on a daily basis. This opaque distinction between public and private space is common in Hong Kong, where developers can offer the 'right of way' on their properties to the general public, to increase their plot ratio.

In the Sheung Fung Lane case, it was the original developer — now absent landlord — who capitalised on this legal loophole. But it is the current apartment owners' corporation who are now required to manage a public space they didn't ask for. It took the Magic Lanes team a good while to understand the complexities of this urban context and map out the different stakeholders, rights and responsibilities. This process positioned Magic Lanes firmly as a credible, neutral party in the conversation between public and private parties as well as in the effort to channel public resources into a safe and quality public space.

2. **Demographic analysis of target audiences.**

The resident profile of Sheung Fung Lane is distinctly middle-class, many of them newcomers to Sai Ying Pun. Because their relationship with the neighbourhood is typically more functional and less community-driven, their mobilisation was more challenging. The team decided to revise the project's target audience to include more of the neighbourhood's original residents, who are still frequent users of the space and who are happy to be involved.

3. **Aligning expectations of funding agencies and local residents.**

While the fundament of the project is community planning and empowerment, the team realised it's important to link them to physical interventions. Not just to satisfy the funding agency but for the residents to see visible changes based on their inputs. Combining the two makes it easier to engage the community and lower the threshold of involvement.

Even though the physical changes may be temporary — like plants on railings or pop-up play equipment — they form an important engagement strategy and a good way to test different uses of space.

FIVE PRINCIPLES FOR QUALITY PUBLIC SPACE

Consolidating resident surveys and project results, the team articulated five key principles for redesigning public space:

- **Cultural inclusion:** connect new and old residents by identifying the cultural assets of the neighbourhood i.e. what does it mean to be a Sai Ying Pun-er? What are places in the area that matter to people?
- **Eco-friendliness:** increase vitality by planting functional greens.
- **Inter-generational space:** bridge elders and children via activities like hopscotch and gardening, where elders can demonstrate their knowledge and tell their stories.
- **Playfulness:** install temporary play equipment such as slides and merry-go-rounds, and add colours and decorations to the dull space.
- **Safety:** improve age-friendliness and safety by widening steps, surfacing, adding street furniture.

WHAT'S NEXT?

The project will extend its duration until early 2020. Navigating the field of stakeholders and respecting their rights and responsibilities will remain a key challenge. Now that Magic Lanes has built trust among both ends of the spectrum, the team can move forward to the next stage. The objective is to improve the quality of space on a more permanent basis within the existing context of ownership and maintenance. With building principles laid out and preliminary consensus reached, Magic Lanes is now working on a feasible design proposal. Physical



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improvements, albeit small, will still be a breakthrough in Hong Kong's rigid and non-human centred planning practice. Magic Lanes will be one of the pioneers of community-led design of public space in the city.

DO'S

- **Take the time and effort to map the stakeholders' respective views, interests, rights and responsibilities.**
- **Identify cultural assets and establish a common identity with the target audience.**
- **Leverage on cultural assets and local champions to build relationships and trust.**
- **Engage and empower audience via temporary physical changes.**

DON'TS

- **Don't blindly follow the original plan.** Instead, allow flexibility in target audience, timeline, and actions to better suit the community's needs.