

INTRODUCTION

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Over the last thousand years, Asian cities have grown into diverse urban settings. Today the region boasts both ancient, sacred cities and more pragmatic cities serving everyday habitats. It is here where the terms fluid and formal come into place. The fluid city we understand as being dominantly open, characterised by behaviours which may shape dynamic, unpredictable and non-linear processes. The formal city we understand as being dominantly closed, referring to planned interventions, which do not involve people but rather governments and their more linear policies and regulations. The fluid and formal city are both part of an urban setting; their relationship defined by the local contexts of each city.

The relationship between the fluid and formal city is a theme not limited to Asian cities. Richard Sennett makes the distinction for example between 'open' and 'closed' cities in Europe and North America. Drawing on French history, he explains how urban territories were once understood as comprising the open *cité* and closed *ville*. The term *cité* refers to the open city as "a collective place-consciousness" that is about "the character of life in a neighbourhood, the feelings people harboured about neighbours and strangers and attachment to place."

The open *cit * is fluid as it is “hard to read,” “self-governed” and made of “dense human substance” and “crowds” (Sennett 2018, p. 52). The closed *ville*, presenting the overall formally planned city, is on the other hand a place where “national states, international business and ubiquitous bureaucracies rule” (idem, p. 60).

FLUID / FORMAL CITIES

The open fluid and closed formal are thus opposite ends of a spectrum. The fluid city predominantly presents open spaces (improvised buildings, flexible use of public places, crooked streets) that unfold due to the ‘tactics’ people develop for their everyday use of an urban space. In contrast, the formal city predominantly existing of closed spaces, (urban new towns, central business districts, green belts, ring roads), is created by ‘strategies’ for intentional planning. In the notion of Michel De Certeau, author of *The Practice of Everyday Life*, ‘tactics’ differ from ‘strategies’, as they “do not presume control and self-reference” (idem, p. 35). The tactics of everyday lives are what creates the open, fluid city, and it is in its continuous resistance to formalisation where the unique identity of the City at Eye Level in Asia unfolds.

FLUID / FORMAL IN ASIAN URBANISM

In Asian cities both the fluid and the formal city are rooted in the regions’ pre-modern history, where urban settlements consisted of open market towns that grew next to closed citadels. This is illustrated in the pre-modern Vietnamese word for city, *th nh th * (Thong 2001, p. 17). Similar to the distinction between *cit * and *ville*, the term referred to the built environment as existing of two parts: a formal citadel (*th nh*) and a self-governed market city of the people (*th *).

When the Asian region started to integrate into the world economy in the 1960s, Modernist urban planning models from Europe and North America were adopted. Slowly, the formal city overtook the fluid city as the model for development and economic growth. As the *cit * was divorced from the *ville* in Europe, a process of separating the *th * from the *th nh* also started in Vietnam. This occurred all over the Asian region, first during colonisation, later in socialist regimes and in globalising cities. However, the fluid city has never been completely tamed in Asia. There are three key aspects that illustrate how fluidity remains part of the character of contemporary Asian cities.

1. A Region of Opposites

First, the region is itself a clash of opposites between dominantly fluid and dominantly formal cities. Cities with more diverse religions and cultures (mixing Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, Christianity) and more liberal / market-led economies (largely South Asian e.g. Jakarta, Bangkok) developed predominantly fluid urbanisms. In contrast, the so-called Asian Tigers (Singapore,

Hong Kong, Seoul, Taipei – cities that first and rapidly integrated into the global market economy) with their largely mono-cultural (e.g. Confucian) and state-led economies, developed predominantly formally. As a Vietnamese urban planner once told me: “The extreme differences in fluidity and formality have developed a distinct contemporary Asian urbanism, it is the position of an Asian city on this continuum which defines its character.”

2. The Hybrid City

Secondly, in each Asian city, the fluid and the formal are often integrated into one hybrid urban fabric. For example, although today the Vietnamese word *thành thị* has faded, the distinction of fluid-formal continues in the contemporary word for city: *thành phố*. This word has its origin in the Chinese language, composed of 城 ('city') and 廂 ('street'). The syllable *thành* ('citadel') connotes the formal city and *phố* ('streets') connotes the fluidity of its people. Today the formal *thành* and fluid *phố* are not just two parts of the morphology of the pre-traditional city, it is also represented throughout all the layers of the contemporary extended hybrid urban fabric. An example from Vietnam that illustrates this is Time City (figure 1-4). The plurality of Asian cities is also illustrated in the cases described later in this chapter. In some of them, the existence of fluid structures is threatened by formalisation. In other cases, it is the formal system that is actively reviving the fluid city, aiming to bring people back to the streets and involving communities in the process.

The Ruralopolis

Another factor is the urban-rural relationship. When the urbanisation process in Asia entered the hinterlands, it created space for rural lifestyles and habitats instead of erasing them altogether. The Indonesian term *kotadesasi* ('town-village-process'),

introduced by Southeast Asian scholar Terry McGee, refers to the typical Asian hybrid rural-urban urbanisation processes (McGee 1967; Ginsburg, Koppel & McGee 1991) that produced the Asian 'Ruralopolis' (Qadeer 2000). Asian cities still maintain structures of old villages, complete with village temples, public spaces around these temples and rural activities in the streets. Additionally, rural lifestyles continue in Asian cities through the way people dress (figure 5) and the use of urban public space. This can be seen in the presence of street-hawkers, wet markets in almost all Asian cities and the way community gardening is gaining attention by being adopted into formal urban development.

Public Space "Inside Out"

The hybrid city is also characterised by the frequent appropriation of public space for private activities. This is a habit of rural lifestyles, yet it is also related to the high density of Asian cities and the subsequent lack of domestic space. In urban Vietnam, for example, public spaces are used for domestic activities like cooking or washing and for commercial operations such as repairing motorbikes or selling food (Söderström & Geertman 2010). This plurality of public space in Vietnam has been conceptualised as public space "inside out" (Drummond 2000). The use of public space for commercial activities relates to the long tradition of Asian trade quarters with shop-houses. In these areas, the commercial / private / public use of a given space often fluctuates over time (see figure 6). The hawkers which are so characteristic of Asian cities, are of course an example of this dynamic.

3. Fluid-Formal Negotiation

Third, the hybrid urban fabric in Asian cities is enabled thanks to regular negotiation between formal planning and the fluidity of people's self-governance.

EXAMPLE OF THE FORMAL AND FLUID CITY IN COMMERCIAL DEVELOPMENT 'TIME CITY' IN HANOI



Figure 1. View from 21st floor residential apartment inside Time City (2016)



Figure 2. View from ring road passing by Time City (2016)



Figure 3. Use of public space inside Time City (2016)



Figure 4. Use of public space just next to the walls outside of Time City (2016)

EXAMPLES OF PLURAL USES OF SPACE IN THE CITY IN THE ASIAN CITY



Figure 5. People walking in the park in their pyjamas in Hanoi (2010)



Figure 6. Park temporarily used for "bird singing contest" in Hanoi (2013)

LENIN SQUARE, HANOI



Figure 7. Base of the Lenin Square used for leisure activities



Figure 8. Youth rollerblading at the Lenin Square (2013)

EXAMPLES OF NEW GATED COMMUNITIES, MALLS, HIGH-RISES



Figure 9. Shopping mall inside Vinhome Riverside Hanoi (previous farmland and villages) (2016)



Figure 10. Kids playing in a protected environment like playgrounds in shopping malls (2019)



Figure 11. Vinhome Riverside promotion banner in Hanoi (2016)

Which one dominates the other depends on the room different actors have to negotiate over the use and design of urban spaces.

The Asian 'Grey Space'

Since the 1960s, urban researchers have been looking at rapidly growing cities trying to understand this room for negotiation using terms such as 'illegal' or 'informal' as opposed to 'legal' and 'formal'. Ultimately, the parameters are related to local governance, which varies per locality. Where there is limited tolerance for "grey space" (Yiftachel 2009) or "zones of exception" (Ong 2006) the formal city will dominate (e.g. Singapore, Seoul). Where there is more tolerance, the fluid city will unfold (e.g. Manila, Jakarta, Bangkok). To return to the Vietnamese example, Hanoi's urban fabric is predominantly characterised by a fluid urbanism that, like water, adapts to the formal developments in the city. Although the intention of the Vietnamese Communist State was to construct a primarily formal city, due to the long years of war combined with a Post-Socialist institutional system in transition, "grey spaces" provided a lot of room for a self-built urban fabric to develop (Geertman 2007, Geertman & Kim 2019). In addition, it allowed private and commercial activities in public space, as well as recreational activities in what is considered in Vietnam as "political" public space (Thomas 2001). Figures 7 and 8 illustrate how this results in a merging of formal and fluid: leisure activities are tolerated at the political Lenin-Square, where it is (in theory) prohibited by law to use space for play (Geertman et. al 2016).

TOWARDS ASIAN CITIES FOR PEOPLE OR BY PEOPLE?

State-led urban planning, privatisation and commercialisation and people themselves have transformed Asia's cities since the 1960s. First, State-led developments demolished many places in the (local) fluid city: e.g. shopping malls replaced many wet-markets and high-rise towers replaced low-rise, self-built vernacular houses. Second, a rising middle class increasingly chooses to move from the fluid (informal / vernacular) to the formal areas (gated communities, high-rises, suburban row houses / villas). By doing so, their lifestyle choices change as well: visits to the wet-market are exchanged for the shopping mall, street badminton is exchanged for indoor gyms and playgrounds (figure 9, 10). These choices are compounded by increased international cultural integration, and Asian States associating formal building typologies with economic success. In some cases, governments spread banners with new town visions (figure 11) to actively propagandise a 'civilised society' as a formalised city (Harms 2009; Schwenkel 2012).

Although some of Asia's distinct character was lost during the first phase of modernisation (1960-late '90s) many Asian urban governments have been reorienting towards what makes Asian cities 'Asian': its people and the liveliness of its streets. Many renovations and reconstructions have now taken place: river-fronts have been restored (in Seoul, Shanghai, Tokyo) and wet-markets,



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shop-houses, street-vendors are being brought back to Asian urban agendas (in Singapore, Beijing, Hong Kong, Vietnam). Within this process, however, local residents are displaced. It is a process similar to gentrification as witnessed in other cities around the globe (Choi 2014; Shin & Kim 2014; La Grange & Pretorius 2014; Geertman 2016). This means for example that renovated shop-houses and wet-markets, previously used by local residents, have now become overtaken by tourists and the upper class (figure 12, 13). It’s clear that “grey-spacing” also enables a process of increased segregation — in Yiftachel’s words, an “urban apartheid” — to emerge (2009).

THE FLUID RESISTING THE FORMAL

Compared to the purposeful divorce of the *cit * and *ville* in Europe, it seems unlikely that the *th nh* (formal) and *ph * (fluid) will separate in this region. The return to a focus on people is not unique for the Asian region, it is the key driver behind the whole placemaking movement, which is developing rapidly in many cities around the world. Yet the key reason why the fluid has such a strong presence in the Asian region might be the strongly embedded collective culture: many old and new networks of local self-governance exist. It explains the self-organising structures in streets like the 7th Avenue Green Street in Asahikawa and Toyohashi as sustainable management models.

Interconnection between public space and public life is of great importance of creating places for the community, yet this requires a change in perspective of modernised food culture by local governments. The examples from Kuala Lumpur and Hanoi show the importance of street food, hawkers and wet-markets as nodes for society. The Laneway Improvement programme in Kuala Lumpur and the Park(ing) Day initiative in Japan show the kinds of mechanisms that create self-organising / fluid networks that can reclaim spaces and places in a city for use. More often than not, these places work upon informal regulations, but at the same time need to understand how to work with the rules. It is precisely these surviving ‘tactics’ of various urban subaltern groups that are resisting and challenging the intentionally planned ‘strategies’ of urban authorities and planners. Asef Bayat has called this in his research in the Middle East the “encroachment of the ordinary” or “low politics” of the street as these fluid networks can gradually transition the urban environment even leading to transitions in formal decision-making in cities (2010).

With all this in mind, it’s important to empower and train future designers to understand both sides of the puzzle. The Design Trust Futures Studio in Hong Kong sets up programmes with young designers and mentors to come up with solutions for spatial issues in dense cities like Hong Kong.

EXAMPLES OF GENTRIFIED SPACE IN ASIA



Figure 12. Shop-house in Kuala Lumpur repurposed to exclusive (expensive) chocolate store, displaced original residents in China Town.



Figure 13. Hanoi: Inner-city building renovated and repurposed for exposition on traditional architecture, displacing original residents (2016)

During the process they make sure to set up private-public space partnerships to ensure the sustainability of these spaces. “You should build relationships to open up the right doors. If the local government is collaborating, they can smooth out the process by helping to ‘bend’ the rules,” explains Marisa Yiu of the Design Trust. That ‘low politics’ on Asian cities at eye level can also easily transform into real political movements is witnessed in the examples of Hanoi’s *Tree Hug Movement* in 2015, Hong Kong’s *Umbrella Movement* (2014) and in the recent *2019-2020 Hong Kong Protests* (Geertman & Boudreau 2018).

TOWARDS OPEN CITIES

In conclusion, although the fluid city remains under pressure of formalisation in Asia, architects and planners in this region — as in other parts in the world — are increasingly shifting attention back to what Sennett called the “Open City.” To realistically do so, however, Sennett proposes that we might need an “ethical code” for city development. A code in which there is “an ethical connection between the urbanist [the planner, the formal] and the urbanite [the people, the fluid].” For Asian cities, this would mean protecting and designing not only tangible Asian heritage (as is often done at present) but also giving space for Asia’s intangible (socio-cultural) structures — which would include giving more voice to the people and their capability towards self-governance. It is this more tactical urbanism by the people, which will both contribute to more equality in cities, as well as provide more meaning to urban places and spaces in this region and elsewhere in the world. As Richard Sennett puts it: “the open city is not created for people but by people.”

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