

Seminars

Architecture, Film and the City

How can the essence of architecture, its graphic and multifaceted qualities be represented in cinema? How do filmmakers go about constructing ambivalent architectural space on celluloid? These issues, integral to the interactive relation between film and architecture were the focus of a seminar held at the Hong Kong Film Archive on 19 February 2005. Guest speakers included art director Bill Lui, architectural designer Gary Chang, and architect Ronald Tam.

Using the Repulse Bay Hotel as an example, Gary Chang pointed out that though the original building was torn down, it was recreated on screen in *Love in a Fallen City* (1984). Then later on, the hotel was reconstructed on its old site. While the one resurrected on screen was a mere film set, there are actually three Repulse Bay Hotels in question. What constitutes illusion and reality is not such a simple concept after all. Architecture is not strictly a material construct, but a spatial experience. Cinema is a medium that captures this unique quality of architecture and imbues it with the vital sense of life.

In *Three: Going Home* (2002), an eerie atmosphere is evoked from the unique architectural layout and spatial dimension of the shooting location - the old police dormitory. The Japanese anime *Ghost in the Shell* (1995), on the other hand, creates the dystopic image of a futuristic wasteland from a composite of Hong Kong city vistas. Cinema has also discovered many overlooked locations and invested new meaning to existing space. Take *Infernal Affairs* (2002) for instance. The rooftop becomes a negotiation place, whereas in *My Life as McDull*, (2001), it is an exercise arena. Elsewhere in *My Life as McDull*, Hong Kong's buildings and living spaces are merged into the electronic game, highlighting the hyperactivity of urban life. Space is also an integral part of architecture. *Chungking Express* (1994) foregrounds the role of space between buildings in urban life through representing Faye Wong's voyeuristic interest in Tony Leung's life as she peers into his apartment while going up the Central escalator. In *The World of Suzie Wong* (1960), the city's many faces are woven into the narrative, making life itself the most imposing architecture.

From the perspective of heritage preservation, Ronald Tam gave many examples of how Hong Kong films retain precious historical footage of the territory's traditional architecture and facades. With Hong Kong's fast-paced urban development, celluloid

images often serve as a sign of times. For example, *Love is a Many-Splendored Thing* (1955) captures scenes of Victoria Harbour, Central and Western districts in the 1950s, while authentic 60s street scenes can be peered through show windows of shops in *The June Bride* (1960). The 70s were dominated by studio productions of the Shaw Brothers, so there is few real location footage of that period, though *Jumping Ash* (1976) is a rare exception. Visions of the 80s can be gleaned from works like *Dangerous Encounters of the First Kind* (1980) and *Father and Son* (1981), which depict with gritty realism the public lavatories, squatter huts, rooftop schools and office interiors of that period. *Made in Hong Kong* (1997) is a classic in the representation of government housing estates. Hong Kong's urban landscape is shaped by a labyrinth of anonymous buildings, streets and alleyways, but for non-residents, the one thing they recognise instantly as a landmark or signpost of the territory is Victoria Harbour. Hence, the harbour features in numerous western film productions.

Bill Lui, who has been an art director for many years, drew from his own experience to expound on architecture's influence on cinema, and how it is aesthetically appropriated by different filmmakers. Often, a film's idea comes from observing existing architecture. Wong Kar-wai was inspired by the bizarre and incredible goings-on that take place within the labyrinthine Chung King Mansions to make *Chungking Express*. The crowded cityscape of Hong Kong makes it difficult for shots with a lot of depth or distance, but it is still possible to frame interesting shots from images of ultramodern buildings co-existing with quaint old streets. Though Hong Kong filmmakers often face limitations in location shooting, many try to get around it by giving the location set a 'make-over'. The mansion of Tai Shi Gong in *The Mad Phoenix* (1997) was remodelled from the Xuan Yuan Ancient Temple situated in Fanling, New Territories. Many redecorations were applied before the set achieved a solid sense of place. *Green Snake* (1993) was supposed to be shot on location around the West Lake in Hangzhou, China, but upon visiting the site, it was deemed unsuitable. After cross-referencing many ancient scroll paintings, the director shot the film in Sai Kung's San Pui Chau, which was refurbished as Qiantang Gate. The scenes taking place at the home of Francis Ng in *Infernal Affairs II* (2003) were the results of edited shots taken from the China Club and the living room of Sir David Akers-Jones. More detailed architectural feature can be observed from *Infernal Affairs III* (2003). The director wanted the police station to have a more contemporary feel to accentuate the high tech background against which the characters' conflicts are played out. So the Cyberport became the location of choice, though it was still under construction at the time of production.

The relation between cinema and architecture is reciprocal. While films preserve a record of architectural sites, they also draw on architecture's multifunctionalism to represent life more vividly. Conversely, architecture not only enhances the film narrative, but also exerts a positive influence on filmmakers' creative process and artistic stance. (Compiled and edited by Kiki Fung; translated by Maggie Lee)

Texture of a City in Hong Kong Cinema

To complement the 'Cityscape in Films' screening programme, the Hong Kong Film Archive held a seminar on 'Texture of a City in Hong Kong Cinema' on 26 February 2005 to explore the changes in Hong Kong's urban texture through architecture old and new as represented in local films. Hosted by Bryan Chang, the seminar featured speakers including HKFA Programmer Law Kar, and film critics Athena Tsui, Bono Lee and Natalie Chan.

Law Kar began by analysing Hong Kong's living surroundings and interpersonal relationships in the 1950s and 60s. Due to the influx of mainland refugees after 1949, Hong Kong's population soared to over a million within a few short years and this gave rise to a serious housing shortage. In December 1953, a fire broke out in the Shek Kip Mei squatter area, damaging 15,000 huts. As seen in the film *Typhoon Signal No. 10* (1959), unauthorised huts are constructed even on the rooftops. The government did not have public rental housing then and there was little it could do to stop the spread of illegal structures. Some made the streets their home as epitomised by the comedies of Sun Ma Si-tsang and Tang Kei-chen.

In the Face of Demolition (1953) of The Union Film Enterprise Ltd shows living conditions in old buildings and uses this inner space to highlight different interpersonal relationships and their meanings. The directors and actors of that era were poor like the characters in the movie. They had the same living environment both on and off the set, so there was no need to create or interpret a role. This also made the film particularly moving. Besides the director Lee Tit used simple filmic language for the mise-en-scène, creating the ambiance of a location shoot within the studio. In the Cantonese films of the 1950s, living conditions are often appalling with frequent conflicts and no privacy. Nonetheless the lower classes are seen as being more communicative, understanding and mutually supportive. By contrast, in the prosperous 1980s and later, dwellers shut themselves away in their own flats and barely know their neighbours. The rapport and intimacy between people is a far cry

from that of the 1950s.

Bono Lee discussed the past and present of housing in Hong Kong. In the 1950s, people sharing the same roof also shared the same boat. But when the first generation of public housing estates entered the scene in the 1970s, social problems emerged. These 'new districts' signalled danger, especially Lower Wong Tai Sin Estate, Shek Kip Mei Estate and Ngau Tau Kok Estate, which were given certain connotations by movies. After the fire in Shek Kip Mei squatter area in 1953, the government drew up a housing policy to solve the housing shortage. It aimed at accommodating the most people within the least space and standardised dwellings to prevent dwellers from causing trouble - an important issue for the colonial government in the 1950s.

Hong Kong's buildings fall into several categories. Pre-1950s old tenement buildings have four storeys and a huge balcony. As Hong Kong culture is a hybrid of different cultures including Lingnan culture, these structures are descendants of Guangzhou's architectural tradition. The second type are colonial buildings like the commercial high-rises in Central. Then there are the Western-style houses or buildings. These are neat, modern structures representing a certain class and lifestyle. The walled villages in the New Territories as seen in *Wild Search* (1989), have been the most immune to colonial culture. Western architecture such as colonial European buildings only began making their appearance here after Hong Kong opened its port to foreign trade. After China's liberation in 1949, migrants and capital from the mainland flooded into Hong Kong, causing a housing shortage and sparking the construction of public housing estates. These were orderly seven-storey buildings where neighbourly relations were warm but privacy unheard of. Examples are the building in *Dumplings* (2004) where Miriam Yeung frequents to visit Bai Ling and the cramped quarters where survivors of the Shek Kip Mei fire are rehoused in *Father and Son* (1981). In terms of shooting styles, they began with classic studio shoots in the early days, made, for instance, by placing an inert camera in a cubicle apartment. With advances in technology, however, outdoor shooting soon became the trend and there were more moving shots. The style can be said to have gone from stage to outdoor filming.

The public housing experience has figured prominently in discussions on Hong Kong identity in recent years. The spirit of public housing was built on a real and present need for a home. Prior to the 1950s, Hong Kong was regarded as a transient shelter by many of its inhabitants. The squatter area of the 1950s had a sense of temporariness and it was soon replaced by 'elevated' accommodations. These concrete

public housing estates were the seed of Hong Kong's housing development. They provided a space for sustainable development and it was only when homes could grow that the Hong Kong identity could take shape as a construct. In the 1970s and 80s, the Home Ownership Scheme was launched and the public could buy their own homes. The government took measures to stabilise society and raise productivity, giving rise to the economic prosperity of the 1970s and 80s. Preventing social disturbance was also high on the government's agenda so the buildings were built such that inhabitants could monitor each other. They were neat, simple and function-oriented with shared facilities in the corridors where the kitchens were located. The 'new districts' of the 1970s, that is, Upper and Lower Ngau Tau Kok Estate, became a magnet for crime and triads and new problems were created. Mutual monitoring was necessary. Balconies were placed across from each other and every four blocks had a ball court or play area in their midst. But the intricate network of corridors, as seen in *The Teahouse* (1974) and *Big Brother Cheng* (1975), became a hotbed of crime. Viewed in a positive light, these corridors were a fresh space, an activity hub for the growing generation of Hong Kongers who, deprived of privacy at home, had to read their porn magazines and seduce their girls in the corridors.

Made in Hong Kong (1997) was shot in Wo Che Estate. With improved spaces resulting from its #-shaped arrangement, the play area between blocks was replaced by a larger 'ball pitch'. The #-shaped design featured in *Made in Hong Kong* had inherited the monitoring function of the panopticonic balconies. Subsequent housing estates are Y-shaped, their main difference from their predecessors being the presence of a gate and a porter in the main entrances. Perhaps these are harder to hire out for shooting but it seems that films prefer using old tenement buildings to portray living conditions in Hong Kong.

Bryan Chang agreed that despite the proliferation of new flats in the 1980s and 90s, filmmakers preferred old tenement flats. He called it 'tenement aesthetics'. Shooting in tenement flats was more convenient than studio shooting of the 1950s. Also the access restrictions of newer flats did not apply to them. The roof of tenement buildings is often portrayed as a free or idealistic world, a space where one seeks answers to life, from which many protagonists have jumped to their deaths.

Bono Lee believes that 'tenement aesthetics' belongs to the culture of youthful assembly and hot-blooded rebellion - a utopia of sorts. In *Truth or Dare: 6th Floor Rear Flat* (2003), a bunch of young flatmates of a spacious old building jam songs and speak their minds on the roof. In *Beyond Our Ken* (2004), Daniel Wu makes out

with his girlfriend on the roof in an attempt to expand their lives within limited space. These tenement structures, with their high ceilings, is also technologically shoot-friendly, which makes them a pet location of filmmakers. With the housing policy in place, many new families moved into public dwellings, leaving the elderly in the old buildings, who are sometimes joined by new young neighbours. The different and highly individualistic lifestyle of the latter is a favourite of Hong Kong films which enjoy sculpting characters with unique identities or who lead a collective existence.

Law Kar also made a few comments on the role of tenement buildings and the aesthetics of nostalgia in Hong Kong cinema. In local films of recent years, representations of the 60s share similar traits because there is little variation in the cityscape of that era. Besides there are no small towns in Hong Kong which can be used as alternative backdrop. Yet these are by no means faithful representations of the 50s and 60s. Rather they are reenactments of the past based on artistic imagination, memory and images which, rendered with retro aesthetics, become a harmonious and familiar habitat. *Days of Being Wild* (1990) and *In the Mood for Love* (2000) are, in fact, not very 'sixties'. In the latter, the sense of alienation in Tony Leung and Maggie Cheung's relationship makes it a modern one despite the 60s setting. It is very different from the cosy community relationships displayed by Tsi Lo-lin and Cheung Ying in *In the Face of Demolition*.

Athena Tsui described the impact of SARS on the psychology of Hong Kong people using buildings in Central and how the director artistically produces meaning in those buildings. The SARS outbreak began in mid-March and came under control in early April. In late April, the film industry launched the 1:99 shorts project. The government had invited 11 movie directors to each shoot a promotional short which aimed at boosting public morale in the fight against SARS. *Memories of Spring 2003* was shot on film in Central by Peter Chan. Against a backdrop of Central, deserted and in black and white, Tony Leung is seen walking alone. The prevailing mood of entrapment and alienation of the scene ties in with the general feeling in Hong Kong at the time. The first colour frame shows the new IFC building. It is juxtaposed with a side street near the Mandarin Oriental, shown in black and white. The latter with its old buildings are the 'heart' of Central while sky-scrapers stand in the periphery. The colour part is modern Central; the black and white is a look at history.

She believes that HSBC is the singular most important building in Hong Kong. Founded by the British, it is nonetheless headquartered in Hong Kong. The film is

shot around the HSBC yet it attempts to avoid the new building erected in the 1990s. It is the previous HSBC to which the director is attached and through which he maps the history of Central. Computer effects are used to key people over each window frame of Jardine House (formerly the Connaught Centre) and its neighbouring building, creating two gigantic prisons. SARS made us prisoners of our own city and Hong Kong's most representative architecture has become a symbol of its own imprisonment. Through the dead city, hearses make their way in tram tracks. The film also alludes to the use of montage in *Battleship Potemkin* (1925). Like Eisenstein's film, it juxtaposes images of steps and lions, yet producing completely different meanings - sadness shrouding the city of SARS.

Natalie Chan discussed how the imagination of the futuristic city is based on the anticipation of crisis by quoting *The Heroic Trio* (1992), *Executioners* (1993), *The Wicked City* (1992), and *Golden Chicken 2* (2003). The first three are pre-1997 productions which exploit the sci-fi genre to express Hong Kong's insecurities about the handover of sovereignty in 1997 and its fear of June 4th. *Golden Chicken 2* was made after 1997, in a period marked by SARS, the economic downturn, and confusion over government policies. Although the films appear to be reflections of the future due to the use of special effects and props, they are really about current difficulties faced by Hong Kong.

In the Johnny To movies *The Heroic Trio* and *Executioners*, Michelle Yeoh, Maggie Cheung, and Anita Mui play heroines responsible for averting a catastrophe. The films' male characters are less sympathetic. There are futuristic elements in both films. The sets have visible framework and there are crisscrossing overhead electric cables and flyovers which are perfect for fight scenes. The visible framework also symbolises emerging danger. The greyish blue tone of the films, moreover, signifies the decline of the city. A damp, suffocating and repressive atmosphere prevails in *The Heroic Trio*, a film which combines sci-fi with elements from Chinese *wuxia* movies and Western shoot-outs. It is this versatility and resourcefulness which makes Hong Kong cinema and culture unique. The film's non-existent city ungrounded in time and space is a fable of Hong Kong.

Disaster movie *Executioners* is about the catastrophe of a nuclear explosion and the danger of radioactive contamination. A synthesis between a sci-fi and a war movie, the film portrays a world plagued by a damaged ecosystem, social imbalance and political chaos - all manifestations of the fear of things to come after 1997. Compared to *The Heroic Trio*, the scenes of chaos in *Executioners* are more terrifying and carry

a greater sense of crisis, triggering memories of the student movement in 1989 - memories of curfew, unrest and assassination.

The 1997-conscious *The Wicked City* uses real locations and neon lights to depict a glamorous city which is undermined by a strong sense of apocalypse and insurmountable dangers. The whole metropolis is pitched into crisis when monsters masquerading as humans appear as the chosen inheritors of sovereignty. Its other crisis is the crisis of trust lurking among its inhabitants. The monsters know that they can control the city by controlling its economy. The financial hub of Central was chosen as the location, in particular, the Bank of China Tower which has the dual identity of being a bank and being China's bank. The film displays an awareness of the impending crisis brought about by the return of Hong Kong's sovereignty to China. Jacky Cheung's character is most representative of the Hong Kong identity. Half-beast and half-human, he too suffers from an identity crisis. The largest civilian plane crashes into the Bank of China in a move that reflects the despise and paranoia felt by Hong Kongers in the 1990s towards Chinese sovereignty.

Golden Chicken 2 is a post-1997 fantasy about recollections - made on the Peak in the year 2046 - of 2003, Hong Kong's most difficult year. The film takes a nostalgic look at SARS, the 1st July protest, the resignations of Anthony Leung and Regina Ip, before flashing back to the 1980s, Hong Kong's golden era. The urban space depicted on the trip from 2046 to the 1980s, however, is uniformly nostalgic and hence unrealistic. The 2003 narrative is sprinkled with news footage from that era and no distinction is made among periods. Everything is conveniently drowned in the nostalgic sentiments of a few old tunes. The film ends with the hope that the future will be better and SARS, of course, has passed.

The speakers examined the developments and anxieties in housing, politics and the economy in pre-and post-colonial Hong Kong through architecture old and new, and, in doing so, retraced the changes in Hong Kong's urban texture. (Compiled and edited by Edith Chiu; translated by Piera Chen)

Events

‘Tricky Wonderland’ Grand Opening



Jürgen Keil, director of Goethe-Institut Hongkong, delivered the welcome speech at the opening ceremony of the three-month exhibition on 10 December 2004, and introduced the eighty-year-old optical effects master Erich Günther to an enthusiastic audience.

‘The Development of Optical Film Tricks’ Seminar

Co-organised with the Goethe-Institut Hongkong, the seminar held on 13 December 2004 at the Archive cinema was conducted by world-renowned expert Uwe Fleischer from Germany to introduce the development and principles of optical film tricks to the students and teaching staff from five local schools participating in the Gifted Students Scheme of the Education and Manpower Bureau.



P.T. Chan (left) of the Education and Manpower Bureau presenting a memento to Angela Tong, head of the HKFA.



The seminar takes the audience on a mesmerizing and educational journey to the tricky wonderland.

Visit by China Film Museum Archivists



Liu Jianzhong, director of the Leading Group for Exhibition, and group members Wang Gonglu and Qi Zhiyong (3rd, 2nd and 5th left) exchanged views and shared experiences with HKFA head Angela Tong, Programmer Law Kar and Acquisition Manager Mable Ho (4th, 6th and 7th left) during the mainland archivists' recent visit to the HKFA.