

Border Stories: Opening Hong Kong's Frontier Territory

On February 15th 2012, 61 years after it was created, The Frontier Closed Area – a buffer zone separating Hong Kong and the People's Republic of China – was partially opened. How can the unique dynamics occurring across the border be harnessed and brought into an urban strategy for this zone that acts as a critical hinge in determining the future urban relationship between Hong Kong and Shenzhen?

CODEPENDENCE

The border between Hong Kong and Shenzhen separates political ideologies, economic systems, citizen rights and social structures. Unlike other peripheral city conditions this border is an extreme case; as Hong Kong thins out and becomes more rural it is bound by the dense urban edge of Shenzhen. The coexistence of the core and the periphery in such close vicinity is a unique urban morphology resulting from the historical evolution of both cities. A legacy of this evolution is the Frontier Closed Area (FCA) – a police protected no man's land that was set up by the British in 1951 to stem illegal migration and smuggling from China– that has been closed off to the public until 2012. A residual space that has developed its own ecosystem and natural habitat, the land pressures from both Hong Kong and Shenzhen now make this land extremely desirable for development. What could the future use of this area be? How could it provide an urban interface that could support the needs of the citizens of both Shenzhen and Hong Kong? How will the tension between private ownership, economic growth and public space be negotiated? How could the uses of the area adapt and change to each city's future development as they grow closer towards unification?

The dual impetus of Chinese economic reform that commenced in the late 1970s together with “handover” and the establishment of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region in 1997 has meant that both cities have become increasingly codependent. Each urban system has become reliant on the other for specific forms of exchange that include drinking-water, capital, waste disposal, material and knowledge. As such, the future of the Frontier Closed Area represents a critical juncture in the acceptance or rejection of the creation of a conjoined Hong Kong-Shenzhen Metropolis.

This paper will propose a new urban model of cooperation for the future of the FCA that harnesses the unique dynamics and spatial conditions that have evolved through the inherent differences between both cities. These include:

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Parallel traders who travel back and forth between the two cities laden with goods desired from either side; pregnant mothers transiting to Hong Kong to give birth to guarantee citizen status for their newborns; and cross-boundary school children from Shenzhen crossing the border daily to be educated. The article will investigate how such cross-border flow has reordered and appropriated urban space on both sides of the border.

MICRO-BORDERS

Borders divide nations, political ideologies, ethnicities, cultural differences, and legal and economic systems. The differential that exists between border-states creates the impetus for exchange through trade, infrastructural networks or migration. Yet, concurrently they display highly articulated tools of control. These include digital databases of identification, goods' screening and border control points. The duality of borders – as charged spaces of both separation and connection – initiates the production of emergent and unique urban constellations. These evidence mechanisms to mediate difference – not towards states of stable equilibrium – but rather in ways that exploit these differences as key drivers of exchange.

In this way border conditions provide clues and potential tools to deal with the increasing pervasiveness of micro-borders within the contemporary city. These micro-borders result from the impact of polarization dividing rich and poor, public and private, ethnicities, religious groups or political beliefs. Often, such divisions result in the promotion of enclaves within the city that are controlled, gated compounds with restricted access and high degrees of security. Stephen Grahame describes the securitization of the city in a post-911 world as a direct threat to the open city in that governments will:

“...reengineer cities so that their porous, open and intrinsically fluid spaces and systems become little more than an endless series of securitized passage points.”¹

Written in the context of considering Jerusalem as a laboratory for “conflict urbanism”², the authors posit that although Jerusalem exemplifies a worst case scenario of the militarization of urban planning and architecture, such spatial products of control permeate our contemporary urban condition. In this process I would argue that micro-borders are formed at the juncture between such enclave conditions and the surrounding city. In order to avoid the exacerbation of the closed-city and move towards a conceptually open-city, such micro-borders require spatial tools to negotiate difference and promote exchange.

The Hong Kong and Shenzhen border is a unique case study in border dynamics. Through analyzing the specific flows resulting from the border the aim is to extract and develop urban strategies that can be applied not only to the FCA but also demonstrate how such an approach could be applied to other closed-cities facing increasingly segregated and divisive urban conditions.

CONCEPTUALIZING THE HONG KONG-SHENZHEN BORDER

The 1997 Handover of Hong Kong back to China did not result in the complete dissolution of the border previously demarcated by the British in 1898. Rather, the border was renamed a boundary and Hong Kong defined as a Special Autonomous Region (SAR) – effectively part of China but maintaining its own legal, economic and citizen independence from the motherland. Access to education, healthcare, predominantly visa free travel and uncensored media all distinguish Hong Kong citizen rights from their mainland counterparts. Although

Figure 1: Within the Frontier Closed Area looking towards Shenzhen.

access to China for Hong Kong citizens is relatively straightforward via the “return-home-permit”, Chinese citizens wanting to come to Hong Kong have to apply for a visa. This was only introduced for individual travel as recently as 2003, prior to which travel was only permitted via group tours or for business purposes.

Such examples of this selective porosity of the border include limitations on financial investment, right to abode and permanent residency, and consumable goods. Policies control permeability and therefore act as control valves between each side. In some examples, unforeseen by-products of these policies result in excessive flow and so regulations have to be readjusted to alter and rebalance the system. In this way, the system is in constant flux – a dynamic field of exchange – and comparable to Eyal Weizman’s description of the frontier:

“If sovereign borders are linear and fixed, frontiers are deep, fragmented and elastic.”³

He argues that if fixed borders preserve and protect citizenship, culture and language through separation, then frontiers act as a zone of contact. Through contending that contemporary urban space exhibits the characteristics of the frontier as a “fragmented territory of extraterritorial enclaves” with their own distinct regulations, he posits that the conditions of the frontier are becoming more embedded within the operations of the city itself.⁴ Furthermore, technology has allowed our conception of the border to extend further from a geographical site to a virtual one, therefore expanding the frontier zone. For example he notes that the US border begins in your home country: as you apply for travel permission you are screened for financial transactions, employment status, criminal records and travel history, thousands of miles before you arrive at the border itself.

The dialectic embedded within the Hong Kong and Shenzhen border is that it is both a heightened space of control and an elastic space of exchange. This tension has given rise to specific flows of groups or individuals who utilize the explicit differences between the two sides towards their own benefit. Two groups in particular – cross border school children and parallel traders – have appropriated the space of the frontier, both having originated from regulations set out to control the porosity of the border itself.

PARALLEL TRADERS

Each day there are over 500,000 passenger border crossings, the majority via rail, interchanging at the Lok Ma Chau or Lo Wu checkpoints.⁵ Over 60% of these travelers originate from Hong Kong and a proportion of this number is made by people who cross the border more than once a day for the purposes of informal trading.⁶ One individual was reported to have crossed the border twenty-six times in one day.⁷ These parallel traders are exploiting a legal loophole. They buy in-demand goods in Hong Kong and sell them on the mainland. At an individual scale this is not illegal, however if done by a company and in increased numbers such transactions would be subject to import tax. Through working the financial margins and price discrepancy of goods between Hong Kong and Shenzhen, parallel traders have found a way to make a lucrative business. The demand from China comes from two sources. Firstly, the huge racketeering of “genuine fake” products in China has meant that mainlanders are skeptical of brands found in China and prefer if their imported goods originate from Hong Kong and so are “authentic”. These goods include not only luxury brands but also electronics, wine, or even diapers. The second source originates from a mistrust of mainland



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produced food items. This is not unsubstantiated: the milk powder scandal of 2008 in which the toxic industrial chemical melamine was found in milk products affected over 300,000 people and resulted in infant deaths.⁸ As a result, milk powder became, and still remains, a key product for parallel traders.

Through observing the operation of parallel traders at Sheung Shui MTR station – the first stop into Hong Kong after the border control point - we have ascertained that there are two types of traders. Individual traders stock up at the local shops in Sheung Shui, with noticeably a large number selling milk powder. Goods are packed into personal shopping trolleys and taken across the border via MTR. On arrival at Lo Wu station vendors simply set up shop on the floor of the public spaces to sell their goods. The other type of trader is one that is part of a syndicate. These syndicates operate as highly organized networks that span across the frontier. Through observing and trailing parallel traders across the border we have ascertained their working methods. Hong Kong agents arrange for a “distributor” to deliver goods to Sheung Shui station either from a local shop or warehouse. Arriving in mini-vans, goods are unloaded swiftly and then broken down into smaller parcels to be carried over by individuals. Arriving at Lo Wu the items are then taken to another location, around 1km from the border itself to avoid prying customs officials, and are re-accumulated, then sold on. The demographic make-up of these goods “mules” is very varied however there is a predominance of elderly men and women. The spatial infrastructure of the train line and border control point is appropriated by these traders, occupying public spaces for loading and packing, toilets and other hidden spaces to temporarily offload and store goods, and the train itself as a cargo vehicle.⁹ If such syndicates were undertaking such scale of export formally they would be subject to taxation and official customs procedures however, as the system is operated through the collective acts of individuals the system is somewhat inviolable.

The traders create congestion problems at stations, in the train and at the border check points,¹⁰ and have inflated the prices of imported goods and created shortages of some products in areas close to the border.¹¹ To curb these negative

Figure 2: Parallel traders mixing with commuters at Sheung Shui MTR station.

effects both governments brought out a series of policies to discourage parallel trade. In 2012 Hong Kong passengers were banned from carrying goods over 32 kgs from the specific train stations of Sheung Shui, Fanling, Lok Ma Chau and Lo Wu. In February 2013, Shenzhen restricted frequent crossers to carry only “essential items” on any trip.¹² In March, Hong Kong Authorities limited the amount of milk powder of each individual to just 1.8kg; and in July, checkpoints were upgraded to highlight passengers who crossed the border more than two times daily.¹³ Policy making is reactive, adjusting the porosity of the border to curb and regulate the informal trade network.

CROSS-BORDER SCHOOL CHILDREN

Another unique group of cross-border commuters are school children, who navigate the border daily to attend school in Hong Kong. Their numbers have increased from just under a thousand in 1999 to over 16,000 in 2012-3.¹⁴ The impact has been threefold. Firstly local districts in the New Territories have been pressurized to supply school places, with North District short of 1,400 Primary One allocations.¹⁵ On the other hand, some village schools have been prevented from closure as they are now able to meet the minimum required intake of children, which had previously been threatened by a government push to consolidate underused facilities.¹⁶ Thirdly, house prices in school catchment areas close to the border have increased by 44% in Yuen Long and 50% in North district from 2010-13 compared to 31% for Hong Kong overall.¹⁷ The border checkpoints have also been modified to include a special lane to facilitate the efficient passage of children to waiting school buses. All of these children are Hong Kong citizens who reside in Shenzhen with either both or one of their parents being PRC (People’s Republic of China) Nationals. Without local hukou (citizen status) in Shenzhen these children are subject to pay for their education, yet are entitled to twelve years free education in Hong Kong, so the motivation is quite clear.

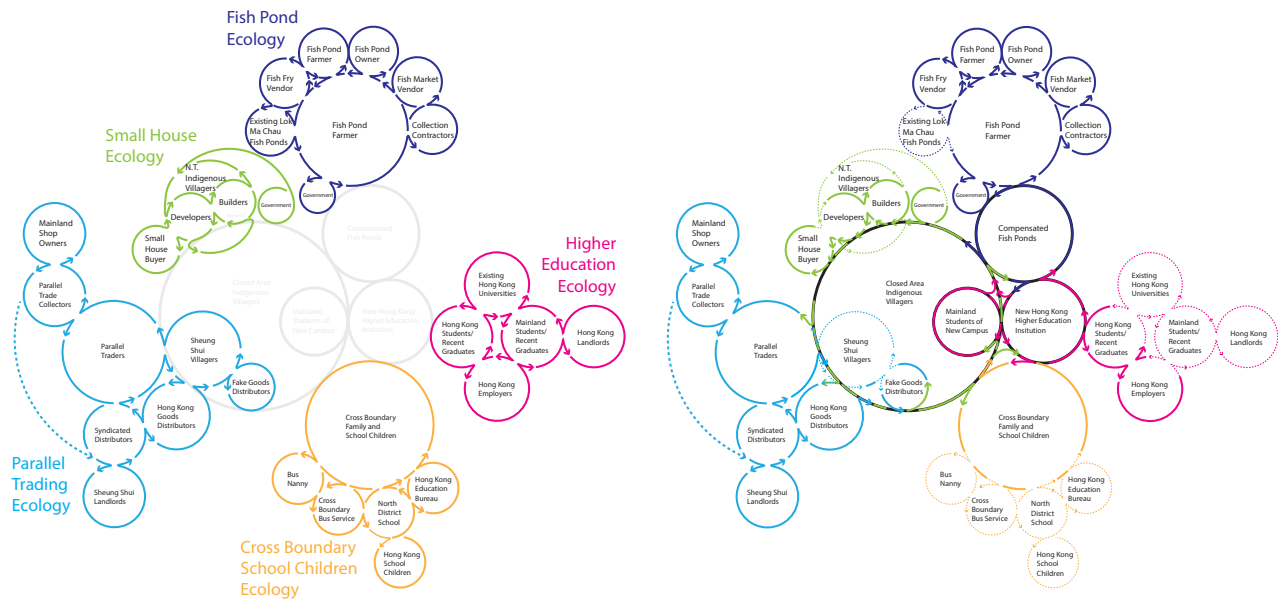
The increase of cross border school children can also be linked to PRC mothers choosing to give birth in Hong Kong rather than in China. A 2001 ruling from the Court of Final Appeal, granted a boy who was born in Hong Kong from two PRC parents Hong Kong citizenship with right to abode.¹⁸ This precipitated a huge rise in the numbers of women crossing the border to give birth due to the associated benefits of Hong Kong citizenship over PRC. In 2011 over one third of the 95,451 births in Hong Kong were babies with neither parent having HK permanent residency. As a result, the HK government initiated a series of regulations to stymie this flow. Initially the cost of giving birth was raised for non-residents to \$20,000HKD in 2006¹⁹ and again to \$39,000 HKD in 2007.²⁰ Mothers without prior reservations and who were over twenty-eight weeks pregnant were simply not allowed to cross the border.²¹ Poster campaigns described the risks of rushing over to give birth without prior ante-natal records and quotas were introduced in 2012 for a maximum of 35,000 mainland mothers.²² Even though the majority of these births were handled by the private sector therefore representing a significant income stream, in 2013 a zero quota policy was introduced to discourage any births in Hong Kong from two mainland parents.²³ The example highlights a shift in the border porosity which initiated a change in the operation of Hong Kong’s health service and catalyzed other by-products: for example: unlicensed hotels began to offer birth packages to mainland mothers.²⁴

It has taken a decade to bring this system back under control. Although a temporal shift, the most important impact is that the children born out of such a policy will



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Figure 3: Cross-boundary students at Lok Ma Chau Border Control Point.



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Figure 4: *Existing and Proposed Ecologies*, diagram explaining the augmentation of existing ecological cycles.

ENDNOTES

1. Stephen Grahame, "Specters of Terror," in *City of Collision – Jerusalem and the Principles of Conflict Urbanism*, ed. Philipp Misselwitz and Tim Rieniets (Basel: Birkhäuser Architecture, 2006), pp.156-162.
2. Philipp Misselwitz and Tim Rieniets, eds, *City of Collision – Jerusalem and the Principles of Conflict Urbanism* (Basel: Birkhäuser Architecture, 2006), pp.24-33.
3. Eyal Weizman, "Principles of Frontier Geography" in *City of Collision – Jerusalem and the Principles of Conflict Urbanism*, ed. Philipp Misselwitz and Tim Rieniets (Basel: Birkhäuser Architecture, 2006), pp.84-92.

have the right to a Hong Kong education. This could amount to an estimate of approximately 300,000 children – a significant figure that would pressurize the Hong Kong school system particularly at the districts closest to the border.²⁵

TOWARDS ANTICIPATORY URBAN MODELS: THE CONSTRUCTION OF AN URBAN ECOLOGY

The two examples of parallel traders and cross border students indicate how border dynamics have initiated emergent flows, economies and have reordered urban space. In the case of the children, it also reveals the presence of a rising number of families who have mixed citizenship. These "in-betweeners" have to negotiate the differences between their citizen rights to make choices about where they live, how they educate their children and for health provision. Clearly these border dynamics pose unique challenges to future urban planning.

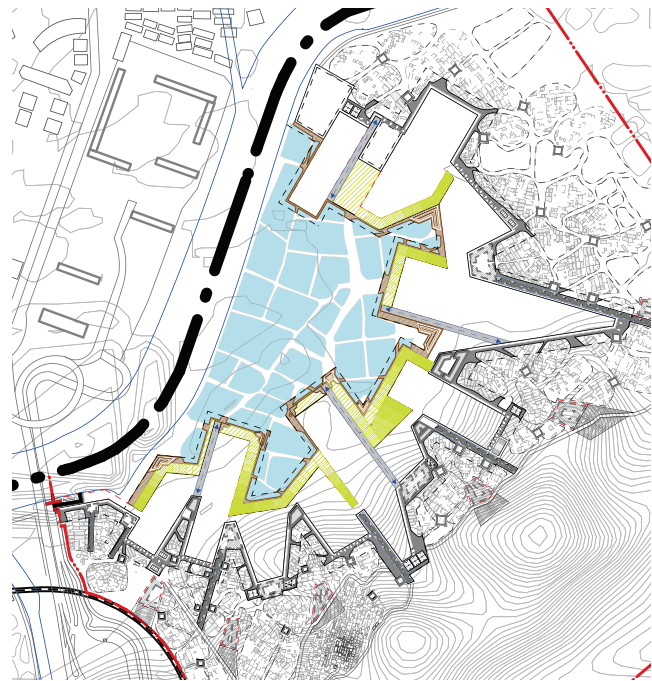
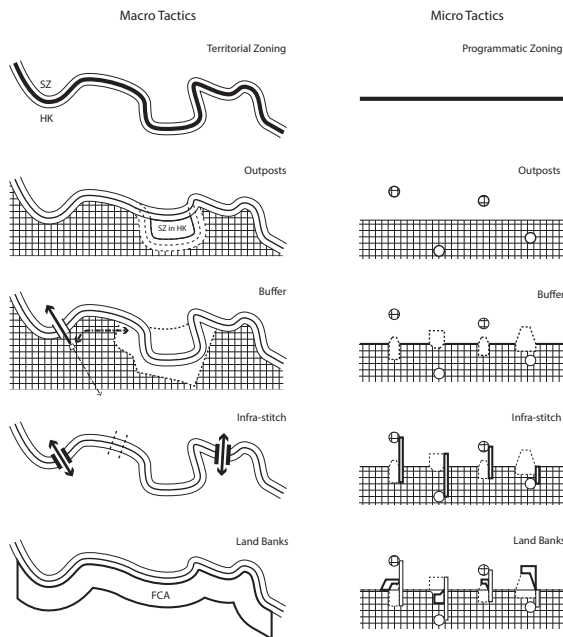
Yet both of these examples could be argued to be temporal because in 2047, the fifty year agreement of the "one country, two systems policy" initiated by Deng Xiaoping will expire. The impact that this will have is undisclosed by both governments raising critical issues towards the future status of Hong Kong.

Will Hong Kong citizenship still exist? Will the boundary be dissolved?

Will legal and economic systems become unified? How can urban planning anticipate this transition?

Richard Sennett highlights the productive effects of borders in the natural world as sites of exchange and mixing and calls for the introduction of "living-edge urbanism" within our cities:

"The planning of the last century was hopeless at creating or promoting borderlands; when urbanists thought about the alternative to the sealed boundary, the dead edge, they could only imagine stripping away all distinctions, creating amorphous 'open' public space. They did not know how to bring edges to life by combining porosity and resistance."²⁶



The Frontier Closed Area is an explicit spatial frontier and represents a planning opportunity to create a dynamic and productive urban edge that Sennett alludes to. The dissolution of the FCA will be completed by 2015. Rather than simply nullify the differences between both sides, or allow both sides to reach a stable state equilibrium, we would like to argue that the implicit tension and differences within border dynamics could be harnessed, encouraged, and intensified towards the creation of a unique urban ecology.

Through identifying and analyzing existing ecologies that occur at the border the aim is to introduce new programs to reconfigure these flows towards new mutual beneficial relationships. These metabolic cycles tap into existing inputs and outputs, augmenting and enhancing their performance.

The Lok Ma Chau Loop exemplifies our approach. The anti-flood, river straightening procedure of the 1990s left a piece of Shenzhen land under the legal administration of Hong Kong. Its ambiguous status has resulted in decades of negotiation that has been somewhat resolved with the intention to build a mutually beneficial university campus on the site.

Rather than plan the site as one homogenous enclave we aim to diversify the proposed campus through introducing new programs that reflect the contextual forces acting at the border location. Additionally, the aim is to integrate the loop into the ecological cycles specific to the wetland environment.

The tactics are as follows:

Territory: The entire zone would be designated with a permit to allow in-betweeners families (one or more members with Hong Kong citizenship) to live in this area. The site would be split programmatically between the campus and residential fabric to create a micro-border within the site and an expanded interface for exchange. By proposing to zone one area with the small-house policy, effectively allowing indigenous villagers of the FCA to build a three story house, the idea is to create a mechanism for informal growth and increased

Figure 5: Strategic plan for the Lok Ma Chau Loop.

The proposal is devised from a set of micro-tactics that correspond to border operations at a macro-scale.

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urban vibrancy. For example these houses could be rented to students, in-betweener families or campus staff and could contain shops and restaurants at ground level.

Outposts and implants: Insert enclaves of different programs within oppositely zoned areas. Parts of the campus are implanted within the village to create opportunities for exchange such as a library, computer labs or study areas. Likewise restaurants, pool halls, bars and other small-scaled leisure activities could interrupt the campus structure.

Buffer zones: Public recreational spaces and wild parks are introduced at the edges between different zones and are mutually beneficial to either side. A large wetland buffer is created at the river's edge, reinstating the fish-pond morphology to remediate waste water from the campus and residential areas.

Infra-stitches: Infrastructural stitches carry waste water to the wetland zone for treatment. These stitches act as landscape corridors connecting different program entities and contain recreational amenities.

Land banks: Pockets of space are reserved for future development. These land banks create flexibility for new programs as the ecology evolves. They can be released according to need, phased to allow for adaptation over time.

The example of the Lok Ma Chau Loop demonstrates how to operate between macro-scaled conditions and deployment at a more localized, spatial scale. The harnessing of border flows and their instrumentation into urban strategies can enhance the FCA's unique qualities and create productive synergies between Hong Kong and Shenzhen. The co-opting and augmentation of existing cycles of exchange can produce an evolving ecology combining natural and artificial systems, synthesizing a "living-edge urbanism" between the two cities. The research potential is to consider how the specificity of conditions found at the Hong Kong-Shenzhen border could lead to the development of spatial tools that could be applied to other urban sites to create productive interfaces of exchange.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper is part of an ongoing research project entitled Border Ecologies led by Joshua Bolchover and Peter Hasdell, and is funded in part by the Research Grants Council, HKSAR. This paper has been assisted by researcher Matthew Hung.