High density development and spatiality of Sham Shui Po, Hong Kong: a Lefebvrian approach

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High Density Development and Spatiality of
Sham Shui Po, Hong Kong:
A Lefebvrian Approach

HUI Tsz Wa

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Philosophy

Principal Supervisor: Prof. TANG Wing Shing
Hong Kong Baptist University
April 2015
DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis represents my own work which has been done after registration for the degree of M.Phil. at Hong Kong Baptist University, and has not been previously included in a thesis, dissertation submitted to this or other institution for a degree, diploma or other qualification.

Signature: _________________
Date: April 2015
ABSTRACT

Reinterpreting the issues of urban density development in Hong Kong, this thesis studies the spatial-temporal production processes of Sham Shui Po as a high density social space. Lefebvre’s theory of ‘the production of space’ is applied for a qualitative-based theoretical-empirical analysis. This study criticizes past literature on urban density issues in Hong Kong, dominated by discourses built upon absolute space approach, for their reductionist methodologies and findings simplifying man-space relations and concealing in-depth socio-political implications. The analysis is centred on three dialectically related elements: spatial practices, conceived spaces (objective, abstract knowledge of space), and lived spaces (subjective values on space).

Deciphering the geographical-historical interactions of the spatial trialectics over Sham Shui Po in general and at individual level, particularly residential and street-commercial spaces, this thesis suggests that Sham Shui Po is deeply influenced by the spatial abstractions of formal density control comprising planning knowledge, legal establishment, capitalist processes, and informal control on spatial practices. They have together rendered Sham Shui Po a space technically and functionally organized in terms of the development of residential and street spaces, resulting in massive property development, widespread space subdivision for high density dwellings, and unique street life with dynamic and transient concentration of corporeality and materiality.

It is also found that recently inhabitants are subject to a dissipation of spatial resistance for alternative dwelling practices due to oppressions from continuously enhanced conceived spaces re-imposing on them and their living spaces. Individuals influenced by consequentially renewed social identities can also be found trapped into high density spaces physically and institutionally, as their spatial practices have been separated, confined and simplified within both interior-residential and exterior-street spaces. Sham Shui Po reveals itself as different spatial mismatches when inhabitants’ lived spaces for securing their spaces of everyday life are without proper response. Deepening the spatial traps and mismatches, the research area is as well undergoing redevelopment processes in reproducing other forms of high density physical fabric, at the expense of original socio-spatialities, through spatial default and historical disconnection.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Additionally I feel very thankful to all interviewees, who spent their precious time to share with me their stories which have greatly inspired me and played a substantial role in writing my thesis.

Without their assistance, this thesis would by no means come into being.

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<td>B(P)R</td>
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<td>C</td>
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<td>CDA</td>
<td>Comprehensive Development Area</td>
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<td>CSD</td>
<td>Census and Statistical Department</td>
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<tr>
<td>G/IC</td>
<td>Government, Institution and Community</td>
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<td>GRF</td>
<td>Gross Floor Area</td>
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<td>Government Record Services of Hong Kong</td>
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<td>Hong Kong Housing Authority</td>
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<td>URA</td>
<td>Urban Renewal Authority</td>
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Chapter 1
Introduction

1.1 Research Background: Living with DenCity

A city goes with density. The process of urbanization is commonly accompanied with the concentration and agglomeration of material, mental and social phenomena, namely, for instance, human being and their social relations, movements and daily practices; architectures and transport networks; media and information; ideas and ideologies, on slightly more than two percent of the surface of the earth (Shelton, Karakiewicz, & Kvan, 2011:12). High urban density, whether in terms of social or physical one, is on one hand regarded by sociologists as a basic characteristic of urbanism attributing to certain social functions (Cuthbert, 1985) and on the other by urban researchers a major geographical trait and fact of a city with heightened significance for contemporary human condition when more and more people are subject to such urban phenomenon under the progress of global urbanization. No doubt, high density development has inevitably been a prevalent characteristic of the city, despite indefinite positive consequences or negative repercussions, varying in physical denseness and ways of manifesting such intensity.

In terms of physical density, whether population, building, development, or residential density, Hong Kong has been deservedly recognized as one of the densest cities in the world—it may also be the most extraordinary urban living environment in terms of the social features and physical forms of intensiveness, given an unusual historical-geographical development (Burgess, 2000; Shelton et al., 2011; Yeh & Yuen, 2011a). Some scholars even described Hong Kong as, instead of simply ‘high’, ‘hyperdensity’ (e.g. Abbas, 1997:81). Statistically there is no lack of data in depicting such situation: with more than seven million people and 1,068 km$^2$ of land, the overall population density of Hong Kong increased from 6,237 persons per km$^2$ in 2001 to 6,544 in 2011, while at district level, that of Sham Shui Po (SSP) district, the study area of this research, for instance, rose from 37,772 in 2001 to 40,690 in 2011(Census and Statistics Department (CSD), 2012a). At street block level, the numbers can be even astonishing: as high as 400,000 to 600,000 persons per km$^2$ (Yeh, 2000). The ubiquitously high-rise,
uniformly and compactly built constructions and bustling streetscapes are also an iconic scene of Hong Kong. Given such situation, there is no denying that physical density of Hong Kong, as a spatial and geographical issue, has substantial influence on the everyday life of every citizen and is in turn an ideal case for research on urban density issues.

The question is, however, how do we understand the density of Hong Kong? Since the early 1960s, many scholars, from a wide spectrum of discipline ranging from social sciences like planning and sociology to natural, applied sciences and environmental sciences, devoted themselves to study the high density problems in Hong Kong. A majority of their studies, nevertheless, has contributed to a phenomenon of imbalanced research focus and approach that researchers tended to accentuate on an ‘absolute space’ approach, viz. the physical and quantitative aspect of density and preferred scientific, technical, and planning efforts in investigating and resolving issues derived from materially intensive urbanism. These methodologies resulted in reductionist human-space relationship that density is simply measurable indicator of material and human conditions in space causing human superficial socio-psychological responses, i.e. ‘perceived density’, which can be quantified at the expense of deeper socio-political implications of density as, for instance, uneven geographical developments, and of its non-physical, conceived (mental), lived (social) dimensions of space. Thus, it is a high time to make a breakthrough in studying urban density issue of Hong Kong through a more critical approach beyond the absolute space and towards a relatively balanced and comprehensive interpretation on the processes of producing urban density as a kind of social space.

Sham Shui Po is then an ideal target of research. This area is no doubt of high density in many aspects. For instance, besides the aforementioned statistical data, in terms of residential space, extremely small-size subdivided units like caged bedspaces and ‘plank-partitioned’ rooms are commonplace, given that private tenement buildings are widespread; from the perspective of economic practices and everyday life, the streets and pedestrian roads are crowded with people passing by or doing business; recently, SSP is also undergoing a mechanical process of urban development, led by Urban Renewal Authority (URA), which has been supplanting the dilapidated, short tenements by erecting high rise private residential properties and more projects are in progress, implying
possible increase in both building and population density. These phenomena, filled with tremendous socio-spatial relations and processes, are worth investigating from a wider horizon.

1.2 Research Objectives and Questions

This research aims at investigating the nature of Sham Shui Po as high density urban spaces, with a postulate that they are socially produced, inspired by a French social theorist and philosopher, Henri Lefebvre, and his theory of ‘the production of space’, in a humanistic Marxist approach. The main research question is, therefore: how the high density space of SSP is produced, perpetuated, and transformed historically by social processes and human agencies? And what are the nature and implications of, and the internal relations between such high density social space and the processes jointly form SSP? To answer them, there are four sets of sub-question, based on Lefebvre’s theory and intrinsically related to each other, needed to be addressed:

1. How density is abstractly represented under certain epistemological assumptions and foundations? How do the abstract representations of space, such as technical expertise and capitalist concepts or know-how, contribute to the production of physical space of SSP and orientating individual understanding and imagination of high density space?

2. How density is geographically and historically manifested through the physical spaces of SSP with differentiations and what are the everyday spatial practices of its related agents within such spaces?

3. How do individuals, subject to spatial abstractions and SSP’s socio-historical context and different physical spaces, give meanings to their own space?

4. Last but not least, how do these three elements change, influence or contradict with each other, and ultimately create the consequential densities of SSP as a totality of different manifestations and processes of spatio-temporality?

These issues will altogether reveal the nature of urban density through three
interweaving elements in dynamics: the physical, the mental, and the social, in order to achieve a relatively balanced and well-rounded urban analysis out of traditional framework.

1.3 Research Methodologies

The abovementioned questions are respectively centred on mainly three related spatial concepts: spatial practices, the representations of space, and the spaces of representation, necessitating each of them a careful deliberation and an investigation on their nature in the case of SSP. In order to decipher such social space, there will be a qualitative-based intensive research entailing both theoretical and empirical analysis on each of these spatial elements.

Prior to the analysis through theoretical framework of ‘the production of space’, six underlying concepts intrinsically connected with each other and related to the nature of the urban, will be first defined and clarified. These concepts include spatiality, temporality, sociality, dialectical relation, relationality, and social process. They are discussed and summarized with the notions of several scholars such as Harvey, Soja, Schmid, Elden, and Merrifield, etc. and will act as the epistemological assumptions of the analytic framework.

Each of the elements of the Lefebvrian spatial tripartition demands for diverse sources of supporting information and data, whether first-hand or second hand, including historical information of SSP, governmental documents such as plans, maps, surveys, reports, and statistics, legal stipulations, and any historical images, etc. They are employed to construct a full picture of temporally transforming man-space relations of SSP, revolving around socio-spatial processes. The information needed is therefore diverse, ranging from the alteration of physical setting and physical practices, the personal values and imaginations of individuals, to the authorities’ conceptions and impositions of abstract spatial orders and capitalist mechanism, and so on. They have been collected from mainly library research, archival research, and government agencies. As for empirical data, semi-structured interviews have been conducted to obtain more subtle and individual information as a supplementation of written-source and more general information.
1.4 Significances of the Research

In Hong Kong, neither the term ‘density’ nor Sham Shui Po has been reviewed and investigated in geographical research through the lens of critical theory. This research is expected to fill in this deficiency to reinterpret the density of Hong Kong through a case study of SSP, emancipating this concept out of the absolute approach by which density has long been stagnantly understood, and virtually de-politicized in a taken-for-granted manner in many urban studies of Hong Kong, whatever subjects and themes they are, as will be discussed in the next chapter. To widen the academic spectrum of studying ‘space’, as arguably a key component of geographical research, is of significance in order to keep pace with this ever-changing capitalist urban reality where socio-spatial relations are transformed even faster than the conventionally attributed object of density: physical fabric.

This fact is valid in SSP where density is never static but processual, and tends to be destabilized due to any intervention of, for instance, urban renewal mechanism. Intermingled with its past socio-historical development, the consequences of such material transformation are never as simple as a replacement of physical density from one formation to another. This research is thus also supposed to expand the imagination and conception of SSP by revealing SSP’s more diverse nature of density and the implications and consequences of such spatiality on SSP and on individuals and their agencies articulated in the very space.

1.5 Outline of the Research

The following discussion is divided into six chapters: Chapter 2 is a literature review which provides a critical scrutiny on the trend, condition, foundation, and deficiency of academic literature on urban density development in Hong Kong produced since the 1960s, and offers some notions to orient alternative interpretation of ‘density’. Chapter 3 links up these notions to several geographers’ conceptions on urban nature as theoretical elements of this research, and elucidates Lefebvre’s theory of the production of space, an analytic framework and its methodological considerations. Chapter 4 to 6 comprises the main body of the analysis. Chapter 4 illustrates the representations of spaces explicitly and implicitly controlling the density of Hong Kong and SSP, discusses their historical
background, and analyses their nature and several implications on SSP’s and individuals’ socio-spatial development. Chapter 5 discusses SSP’s general historical development of its urban fabric, in which social practices have taken place, and by which some clues about how such unique space of SSP and its social life have been generally shaped under the influences of the representations of space are unfolded. Based on the arguments of the previous two chapters, finally, chapter 6 through four individual cases goes deeper to investigate individuals’ everyday life of and their imaginations on living with (non-)intensive residential and exterior (street-commercial) spaces and to explain their relations and repercussions with all the spatial implications generated under the abstract representations. The last chapter will be a conclusion summarizing major arguments and explaining the implications of this research on the study of urban density and critical urban geography in Hong Kong.
Chapter 2
Literature Review

Conceptual Trajectory of Urban Density in Hong Kong

2.1 Introduction

Behind each research there exist assumptions orientating the researchers’ choice of methodology, research theme and subject, hypotheses, the objective of study, etc. and in turn the expected result of such inquiry built upon the chosen approach. There is no exception in the studies of urban density issues of Hong Kong in the past half-century and in the researches on various social issues that density was a narrow, rigidly defined concept dominantly regarded as merely a physical, spatial context represented in different ways. Specifically, it was virtually referred to certain quantitative measurements or descriptions (mainly in form of ratio) of various physical conditions related to the number of population, building, and the surface area of a particular land parcel, building site, floor area, or rooms, etc. which can be projected by any means such as mapping or charting. These are the indicators of the physical dimensions of space, metaphorically as a ‘vessel’, within which ‘things’ (e.g. built environments, social relations, political structures, etc.) are contained and as a component of what Lefebvre (1991) or Harvey (1997; 2006) designated as ‘absolute space’, which is static, fixed, objective, physical, and statistically and geometrically (i.e. mentally and abstractly) measurable.

While some scholars (e.g. Chau, 1981; Fouchier, 1994; Cheng, 2010b; Yeh & Yuen, 2011b) suggested that density could be interpreted as subjective and psychological perception by differentiating ‘high physical density’ from ‘overcrowding’, i.e. negative feelings like stress spawned from an exposure of unwanted social interaction in people-intensive environment. Although its meaning is of occasional inconsistency as it has been used interchangeably with ‘high density’ by some scholars (e.g. Hassan, 1975, Liang, 1975; Chan, 1978), density as a condition of physical space in a specific time remains a medium of such perception of overcrowding. Accordingly, such conception of density is greatly influential on the approach of the studies reviewed in the following section, whereas more dimensions of density—as produced by social and spatial
processes—and in turn their consequential implications and potentials for a wider vision on the issue of high density development have been neglected, resulting in a defect of intellectual signification of ‘density’ itself.

This research is not to intend to reject the notion that density should be conceptualized as an absolute space or a subjective perception, and that Hong Kong should have high density development, but it should therefore be pertinent to assume the concept and the nature of ‘density’, especially in the realm of urban studies, are intrinsically more complicated than that one can ordinarily imagine and conceive in his everyday life and experience, or that taken for granted by most academics, as Cuthbert (1985) suggested.

To unfold such problematic situation, this chapter aims at offering a literature review incorporating two groups of works: the first section scrutinizes academic works related to high density development of Hong Kong explicitly (i.e. density as a main theme or a research object) or implicitly (i.e. density as a contextual background), including research papers and book chapters in diverse disciplines and themes, published as early as the 1960s. To contrast with the research approach adopted by such literature, several exceptional works are taken into account. The second section examines the works on multifaceted social issues and historical development of SSP (district). Apparently density was not their main concern whereas its implication and manifestation were latent and implicit, still being a spatial context where social relations occur. This notion of density, again, is found wanting. While research approach and methodology between virtually all literature and this study are greatly divergent, this review is not confined to a pure description of findings but uncover the common features and deficiencies of their postulates, methodologies and findings.

2.2 Conceptual Development of Density in Hong Kong (1963-2013)

This section is divided into four parts. A categorization of literature based on topics and methodologies, and the historical trend of academic interest are first presented, though their boundaries are not always a clear-cut but sometimes blurred, given their interdisciplinary nature that these studies may overlap with others in terms of theme or research object. This unfolds the origin of researchers’ preference on interpreting the nature of ‘density’. Then it explains the ontological assumptions of density per se and how density has been discussed as contextual
assumptions of Hong Kong in the literature, resulting in deficient approach in interpreting density. As Cuthbert (1985) commented, guided by questionable methodologies and presuppositions, those researches in turn brought forth outcomes which divorced density from broader socio-political processes, concerns and significations for each individual. This issue of ‘human-space relationship’ is discussed in the third section. The final section provides an overview of literature with alternative approaches to interpret density.

2.2.1 Trend of Academic Interest

Academic research on density is basically subject-based instead of as an independent discipline. For the explicit studies on high density development of Hong Kong, such academic interest thrived in the post second world war era, especially since the 1960s when there was a loosened legal control and a technological advancement in construction engineering that contributed to a mushrooming of high rise buildings (Yeh & Yuen, 2011b). For the implicit ones, Hong Kong’s unique intensive urban development provided a testing ground for researchers to revise or verify theories, mainly produced from the western urban contexts, by situating the same research objects, i.e. various socio-environmental phenomenon, to the compact urban setting of Hong Kong. All literature can be roughly categorized into three major disciplines: planning, housing and urban studies, social studies, as well as environmental sciences and sustainability studies. There are at least four exceptions, including an urban anthropologist study conducted by Anderson (1972), an architectural study presented by Cuthbert (1985), a sociological study in form of participant observation by Cheung (2000) and a work by Rooney (2003) on the interior design of public housing and the residents’ way of life within it. Their merit and deficiencies are to be discussed in the following respective sections.

For planning, housing and urban studies, there is a wide range of theme including for instance:

1. *Urbanization in high density development* (Dwyer, 1971; Prescott, 1971);

2. *Urban planning of Hong Kong* (Schmitt, 1963; Haddon, 1972; Yeung & Drakakis-Smith, 1980; Lee, 1981; Chau, 1981; Chan,
Chapter 2   Literature Review

1993; Gilchriest, 1994; Pun, 1994; Pryor, 1997; Yeh, 2000; Zhang, 2000; Zaman, Lau, & So, 2000; Lau, Wang, Giridharan, & Ganesan, 2005; Lee & Chan, 2008; Yeh & Yuen, 2011a; 2011b);

3. *Housing or building policy in high density urban environment* (Lai, 1974; Dwyer, 1975; Lai, 1993; Lai, 2001, Chau, Wong, Chan, & Lam, 2011); and

4. *Transport and policy* (Barden & Runnacles, 1986; Dimitrious & Fouchier, 1994; Tong & Wong, 1997); and

5. *Architecture* (Lampugnani, 1993; Shelton et al., 2011, French & Lee, 2013, etc.),

6. *Urban greening in compact city* (Tian, Jim, & Tao, 2012, etc.); and

7. *Accessibility in compact city* (Lau & Chiu, 2004), etc.

For social studies, the themes are:

1. *Quantitative biosocial/biopsychic survey* (Mitchell, 1971; Hassan, 1975; Liang, 1975; Traver, 1976; Chan, 1978; Millar, 1979; Chan, 1979); and

2. *Quantitative sociological study* (Forrest, La Grange, & Yip, 2002; Philips, Siu, Yeh, & Cheng, 2004; Yip, La Grange, & Forrest, 2009; Yeh & Yuen, 2011b).

Environmental sciences and sustainability studies embrace diverse subjects of

1. *Urban morphology and sustainable housing design* (Chan & Lee, 2009; Lau, 2011; Zhu & Chiu, 2011);

2. *Urban climatology and urban design* (Givoni, 2010; Ng, 2010b; Ng, 2010c; Lau, Ng, & He, 2013; Cheung & Fan, 2013);

3. *Energy studies and building design* (Hui, 2001); and


As far as their research themes and methodologies are concerned, a historical trend of academic interest is manifested.

The literature began from a response to an ‘anti-high density hypothesis’ originated from western planning realm as early as the 1920s (Chau, 1981), which
were cautious about the negative impacts of high density on human behaviours (e.g. creating psychological stress of crowding) and hypothesized that poorly planned high density urban setting resulted in social pathologies, on condition it exceeded ‘a certain level of critical intensity’ (ibid. p.1). Since then efforts in unravelling their relationships were ceaselessly put and seen in the research outputs of urban studies, biology and ethology, and socio-environmental psychology. This ideology even spread to the east as Chau argued that ‘Hong Kong was preoccupied by the fear of high density up to the early 1960s’ (ibid.).

Schmitt’s (1963) article marked a beginning of ‘disenchantment’ against the fear and the ‘demonization’ of high density. In the 1960s, after a wave of rapid population growth by immigration, he observed the daily life of residents living in various kinds of housing, such as squatters’ shacks and resettlement estates located at urban Hong Kong and found with astonishment that people dwelling in extremely and undesirably crowded environment, compared to western standard, were not accompanied with severe social pathology and health issue. He concluded that ‘the experience of Hong Kong proves that an urban population can survive and even flourish under conditions of density and overcrowding that today seem unthinkable to many Americans…’, and in turn urged that ‘[p]erhaps planners should re-examine their standard in the light of these considerations.’ (ibid. p.216)

Then, since the early 1970s there was a wave of quantitative biosocial surveys, aimed at discovering whether there was any relationship between physical density and problems of well-being such as mental health, the perceptions of social interaction, family relation, living satisfaction, and social pathologies, and also individual attitudes and development like preference for privacy and social contact, etc. Statistical operations like simple liner regression were deployed in these studies in which spatial elements were artificially converted into mathematical variables linked by correlations with differing covariance. These researches generally suggested that the relations of various corporeal, psychological and social pathologies with physical density in itself were either inconclusive to support their existence, or, if any, rather weak. Instead, other cultural, socio-economic factors, and psychological conditions resulted from or associated with material density contributed more to those pathologies and should therefore be given more attention when discussing the impacts of physical
density on man.

These findings with an academic ‘disenchantment’ then influentially helped underpin and legitimize another research interest, bringing heightened focus on general planning and urban study under high density setting since the 1970s. A belief that high density *per se* did not cause social disorders but poor planning had become a virtually taken-for-granted postulate prevailing in those researches. Few scholars, such as Lee (1981) and Lai (1993), articulated a critical, sceptical attitude towards the methodologies and the findings of those studies. Others like Chau (1981:6) refuted accusations, by Liang (1975) for instance, against the correlation between detrimental social and environmental effects and physical density through questioning the validity of findings.

On the other hand, Anderson’s (1972) anthropological study might meanwhile act as a catalytic to strengthen such belief. He by observing the behavioural characteristics of the Chinese—traditions, norms, unwritten rules for sharing dwelling space with family members or unrelated others, and the ingenuity of using space in dealing with crowded living environment—concluded that high tolerance and mechanism of adaptation to high density living conditions were general features among the Chinese. This reminds us that individuals are not completely passive beings to their surroundings but their socio-cultural features help relieve the influences of and adapt crowded living environment so that density *per se* may not necessarily accompany with pathologies. Influential as it had been on the succeeding literature, this inquiry was criticized for being not methodologically rigor that no sufficient qualitative or quantitative evidences were provided or being overgeneralized to each of the individuals with particular socio-economic traits and empirical life (Lee, 1981; Lai, 1993).

Whatever stance on these notions scholars or planners held, the principle of ‘good planning’, which has hitherto remained influential, was of universal acceptance and adherence. Therefore, the question is no longer ‘how do we avoid high density urban development?’ but ‘how to plan and design a sustainable and successful high density city?’ Despite the observations of the disadvantageous side of high urban density, it has been believed that through an encompassing, sophisticated, and detailed planning mechanism to adjust, modify or create (new) material settings, negative impacts would be alleviated and environment-friendly development could be achieved, while given a seemingly apparent and
unchallengeable ‘fact’ (or more appropriately, ‘myth’) of ‘scarce land with huge population in Hong Kong’, high density development has effortlessly gained it legitimacy, and become a pragmatic need suggested in the literature.

While only a few of them were in part mentioned, the evolving institutional processes of managing density (e.g. Chan, 1993; Lai, 1993; Yeh, 2000), the works of planning and urban study are almost descriptive, prescriptive and normative—they are descriptive as the historical, topographical, political and socio-economic contexts of Hong Kong, such as planning and housing policies, were listed out as an explanation on current urban forms and physical conditions. Some simply introduce the forms, patterns of density in Hong Kong focusing on the aspect of architectural design like high-rise constructions. They are prescriptive and normative as the strategies of developing and planning what Burgess (2000) called an ideal ‘compact city’ which related to, for example, the planning of multiple and intensive land use, transport, social relations, amenity, housing design and policy, urban management, and infrastructure, etc. were technically put forward, and evaluation or criticism on the effectiveness of policies related to formal density control (e.g. zoning, planning regulations) were also provided with suggestions for improvement (e.g. Chan, 1993). In sum, it is all about how a city, as a total sum of material, energy, as well as human activity in space, is rightly planned and organized, and how resources are distributed for greatest efficiency, by concerning a great deal of such urban features (or restrictions) as connectivity, verticality, concentration, movement, scale, regulation, or to put it simply: urban complexity (Shelton et al., 2011).

In the 2000s the academic inquiry of high density issues in Hong Kong has witnessed a ‘scientific turn’ in research methodology. Except three sociological studies which contributed to a revival of quantitative inquiry into the correlation between high density living environment in Hong Kong and social relations including residential satisfaction (Philips et al., 2004), residential mobility (Yip et al., 2009), and the senses of neighbourhood and community (Forrest et al., 2002), investigations on planning for high density urban surroundings has also switched its approach to environmental sciences and sustainability study. Two monographs edited by Ng (2010) and Yuen and Yeh (2011) were major contributors to such turn. Under the aegis of mathematical and computerized models to simulate the dynamics of physical environment in more sophisticated and precise fashions,
scholars offered recommendations for optimal modification or design of urban built forms in relation to, for instance, ventilation (Ng, 2010b), solar access (Lau et al., 2013), urban renewal (Chan & Lee, 2009; Lee & Chan, 2008), and low energy building (Hui, 2001). For survey use ‘physical density’ has also been dismissed either as a contextual variation or as a set of statistical indicator (e.g. the preference of certain facility design) regarding material conditions comprising the very density. These positivist inquiries have underpinned the belief of ‘good planning’ while the position of human agency in actively shaping the spaces of everyday life has been withering away, and reduced to passive responders to the stimulations and transformations of surrounding environment and spatial elements.

From quantitative social studies to planning and urban studies to environmental sciences and sustainability studies, each shift of academic interest or major research methodology was virtually devoid of a re-conceptualization of ‘density’ and a rethought of its intricate ties to human agency, space, and social relations. More comprehensive analysis, examples, and consequential implications are presented in the next two sessions.

2.2.2 Ontological Assumptions:

Dichotomy of Physical Density and Perceived Density

Among the literature there is no lack of empirical and statistical data in describing the extremely dense and intensive physical urban form of Hong Kong which is a widely recognized fact, rendering a challenge of it bound to be absurd. To begin their discussions with a characterization of the visual reality of Hong Kong through those data was also a commonplace. The sidewalks at the urban commercial districts crammed with pedestrians, the clustered high rise buildings at central business districts, and the non-self-contained, poor spatial standard subdivided flats, cage houses, and cubicles in dilapidate tenement buildings 1 within old districts, for example, are all concrete physical elements acting as the integral parts of ‘density’. Possible explanation on their prevailing role of such

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1 ‘Tenement’ in this thesis refers to ‘Tong Lau (唐樓)’. Another name for this kind of architecture in English is ‘shophouse’ (Yiu and Ng, 2008:20).
spatial conception of density may be that those which always come first in human visual perception are easier to be observed and measured precisely and accurately than more abstract social processes and relations inherent in them which together produce the material reality we experience, and as Cuthbert (1985) suggested, they can technically serve as an objective and ‘purely administrative device’ for any planning purpose (p.119). Bulter’s (2012) argument is congruent with such hypothesis:

‘[…] one of the reasons for this historical lack of interest in the spatial [social space] has been the dominance of the empiricism that characterises the post-Cartesian view of absolute space—and keeps the analysis of the space at the level of immediately perceptible.’ (p.58, emphasis added)

In addition, Harvey (1997:22) argued that ‘the reduction of the urban—or the portrayal of the city as a minor feature of social organization—can only occur when particular assumptions are made about the nature of space and time or space/time’. To reveal such condition necessitates a further analysis on the ways scholars defined and conceptualized ‘density’, and the consequential difficulties derived from such perspective in their studies.

‘Density’ is usually conceptualized as physical density, referring to ‘a theoretical ratio between a quantity or a statistical indicator…and the occupied surface’ (Fouchier, 1994:7-8), or in other words ‘a numerical measure of the concentration of individuals or physical structures within a given geographical unit’, which ‘[taking] on a real meaning only if it is related to a scale of reference’ (ibid.; Cheng, 2010b:3). Thus, it is related to the material conditions of a particular space (in a particular point of time). The following definitions are the major and most widely used measures of physical density in the literature:

1. Regional density: ‘the ratio of a population to the land area of a region’ (people per unit area of a region);
2. Residential density: ‘the ratio of a population to residential land area’ (people per unit area of residential land area);
3. Occupancy density: ‘the ratio of the number of occupants to the floor area of an individual habitable unit’ (people per square unit area of an individual habitable unit); or the number of persons to a habitable room/bed;
4. Occupancy rate: the ratio of the floor area of an individual
habitable unit to the number of occupants (square unit area of an individual habitable unit per person);

5. *Plot ratio/ floor-to-site ratio (FSR)*: ‘the ratio of total gross floor area of a development to its [net] site area’; and


Density in these senses is not one standard but multivariate technical and abstract definition at researchers’ disposal for their own purposes of investigation (Cuthbert, 1985). When it comes to ‘high density’, therefore, it implies that there is relatively large amount of people or material (e.g. buildings, rooms, roads, vehicles, etc.) in a given area, ‘providing a relative shortage of space’ (Sundstrom, 1978, quoted in Chau, 1981:3). In some cases, however, ‘high density’ became a loose term referring to a universal phenomenon, that is, the physical setting of Hong Kong in which precise and rigorous mathematical operations were not demanded, except some general statistics about total or district population density and occupancy rate/density in order to highlight the extraordinary urban conditions of Hong Kong relative to that of other cities all over the world. Thus physical density was and can be discussed from a micro- to a macro-scale or geographical level.

Nevertheless, scholars have offered another approach to apprehend density: *perceived density* as subjective experiences (Cheng, 2010b; Chau, 1981; Cuthbert, 1985; Fouchier, 1994). It is the psychological, personal, and subjective ‘perception and estimate of the number of people present in a given area [i.e. ‘social density’: interactions between people], the space available and its organization [i.e. ‘spatial density’: relationship among people and spatial elements such as room height and spacing of furniture]’ (Rapoport, 1975, quoted in Cheng, 2010b:12). Physical environment (e.g. residential space, street, workplace, etc.) and its condition of density are the integral components of such perception but socio-cultural background, economic status, education level, health conditions and so on also contribute to it. Crowding or overcrowding is then a psychological stress resulted from a negatively perceived density, which is subject to factors such as the duration, the physical condition of being situated at a socially
overcharged state with people interactions and contacts, as well as one’s prevailing mood, etc. (Hassan, 1975; Cuthbert, 1985:120).

Despite the alternative way of conceptualizing density, for research purpose the physical one remained dominant in the literature though the academically ‘unobjective’ one was not totally dismissed but linked superficially. Among those quantitative biosocial or biopsychic studies, Mitchell (1971) concerned with individual attitude toward housing, emotional strain, social features, as well as family relations of individuals dwelling in high density flat, defining density as a condition of housing, in terms of average floor area of a dwelling unit and occupancy rate. Traver (1976) examined the relationship between the preference of privacy and residents living in low or high density housing, and the social forces attributed to such relationship. To divide two groups of interviewee into ‘low density respondents’ and ‘high density respondents’, he unequivocally defined high density as a living environment less than 170 square feet (p.331), while Liang (1975) regarded ‘overcrowding’ as ‘a residential space of less than 80 sq. ft. per person’ (p.229). This contrast ironically reveals the arbitrary, subjective, and relative nature of the concept of ‘physical density’ in describing the circumstance of a particular space. Liang also visualized density by projecting its spatial distribution on maps, plotting out the values of different types of density measurement on the basis of tertiary planning units (TPU). In his research on dense urban environment and social relations, Chan (1979) applied the concepts of ‘outdoor density’, which was the number of ‘persons per hectare by tertiary planning unit’, and ‘indoor density’ defined as ‘effective floor space (in square feet) per capita in the household’ (p.318). Millar (1979) studied the perception of density but still by statistical method through asking interviewees questions concerning the degree of satisfaction of the size of their dwelling and the reaction when exposing to a place crammed with people.

For the rest of the literature, i.e. planning and urban studies, quantitative social studies, environmental sciences and sustainability studies, for instance, Lai (1974) depicted the indoor and outdoor spatial setting of the earliest type of public housing and resettlement estate, revealing insufficient amenity, foul public facilities, substandard and overcrowding living space, residents’ spatial ingenuity and strategies in coping with limited space, and the consequential social and environmental conflicts; Yeh and Yuen (2011a; 2011b) and Lau (2011)
demonstrated the morphology of high rise high density buildings in Hong Kong; Lai and Ho (1993) showed the incentives for adding unauthorized structures on building for enhancing usable living space; Barden and Runnacles (1986) and Tong and Wong (1997) delineated the progress and spatial distribution of transport networks and infrastructures serving tremendously populated and densely built urban area; Lau et al. (2005) described how multiple and intensive land use (MILU) as a strategy of spatial planning for ‘compact city’ had been applied to Hong Kong by constructing elevated pedestrian walkway network and high rise residential tower with connected podium and underground public transport node, etc.

Such conception of density as mainly a ‘thing’ or ‘spatial form’ with which an individual can perceive is not immune from deficiency. This interpretation is a reductionist approach abstracting only physical reality and at most its superficial relationships with human agency while obscuring underlying processes. Problems regarding density are relegated to merely planning effort. A person in such conception is reduced to a self-existing being psychologically and behaviourally subject to any stimulus of physically dense living space, simply reacting to it or transforming it in order to alleviate its impacts. Nevertheless, human and space have their own historical development, geographical features, and social elements, determining how a space is produced and reproduced and how people live their everyday life with unique processes and within an intricate urban reality. Being absent in the literature, more questions should have been asked: for instance, who has and who has no power for, and what are the economic and political mechanisms under capitalist mode of production in perpetuating high density space and certain spatial imaginations? How does such space evolve—rather than simply distribute—historically? How do people live their everyday life in different kinds of space with varying densities, not only residential one but also those where their practices take place? How do people imagine and think about their way of life within such space and in turn resist or persist their living situations? How do physically dense space and people mutually influence each other? These questions related to ‘density as processes’ extends the vision of human-space relation to wider dimensions and reveal more social and political implications. In other words, processes are intrinsically linked with urban form and their relations should not be overlooked.
2.2.3 Contextual Assumptions: Density as Consequences of Fragmented, Unrelated Events

Even though many studies considered with more social, economic, and environmental mechanism attributing to Hong Kong’s intensive urban development, they generally ignored the aspect of social process but simply regarded them as each of the independent outcomes without connecting them or further investigating their underlying relations.

They include topographical restrictions that Hong Kong has relatively few flat lands for development due to prevailing hilly and precipitous terrain and the policy of preservation of rural land and country areas, limiting urban development to mainly concentrate on the northern shore of Hong Kong island, Kowloon peninsula and part of the New Territories (Liang, 1975; Gilchriest, 1994; Zhang, 2000; Zaman et al., 2000; Yeh, 2000; Yip et al., 2009); the political considerations of British Hong Kong government in colonial era that strictly controlled the development of New Territories and regarded it as a strategic space and a buffer zone between the Mainland China and urban Hong Kong by preserving the land lease and the lifestyle of indigenous residents (Liang, 1975); the institutional control on the scale, location and rate of land development through high land price policy in which land supply has long been confined and in turn resulted in a situation that merely high rise constructions could maximize government revenue and the efficiency of capital accumulation (ibid.; Zaman et al., 2000; Yeh, 2000; Yip et al., 2009); relatively loose planning control before the 1980s that property developers could exhaust the permitted gross floor area or plot ratio by constructing high rise high density towers with less concern for design (Prescott, 1971); the deindustrialization of Hong Kong, the shift of economic structure to service-based economy and the transforming relationship with the Mainland Chain since the 1980s rendering compact city form more feasible (Zhang, 2000; Zaman et al., 2000); demographic growth and large-scale immigrations in the late 1940s and 1970s which triggered the pressure of demanding proper dwelling, resulting in the commitment of government to develop multistorey yet high density subsidized resettlements and public housing estates and to encourage private property (re)developments, under the concerns of minimum cost and economic efficiency (Dwyer, 1975; Chan, 1979; Lai, 1993; Gilchriest, 1994; Yeh,
2000; Zhang, 2000); and the cultural inertia of the Chinese in praising communal propinquity and gregariousness and tolerating crowded environment (Schmitt, 1963; Anderson, 1972; Barden and Runnacles, 1986; Pryor, 1997; Zhang, 2000; Zaman et al., 2000), etc.

They might explain the origin of urban morphology of Hong Kong at certain points of time or the chronological shift of the arrangement of material content, but they were simply represented as a ‘thing’ or fixed outcome (e.g. an economic and political decision restricting spatial form, spatial distribution or the quality and quantity of population and construction, etc.) without further discussion. As individual, unrelated, and fragmented events, the question of how they are related in terms of socio-spatial processes therefore remains unsolved, even though there can be more in-depth implications derived from these questions. In other words, to unfold the full picture of high density development those contexts should be embedded and coalescent to ever-changing sociality, temporality and spatiality.

2.2.4 Methodologies and Findings:

Relegation and De-politicization of Human-Space Relationship

Even though some studies related themselves more with the perceived density, if the research has still been guided overwhelmingly by the conception of physical density without any processual element, a narrow human-space relationship emerged and resulted in bias in research methods, such as the choice of research object and the ways of data collection, and in turn a de-politicization of findings. These studies postulate that, human being, as simply an element subordinated to a space, is affected by its features and thus generates negative or positive feedbacks, represented by a set of variables and mathematical values referring to their social and psychological conditions, while space is a measurable, modifiable and malleable container of man. Except occasional and superficial references, they are virtually devoid of broader and deeper social, political, and spatial significations behind their objects of research: the critique of inequality and injustice in resource distribution; the awareness of the complex human situations in which suffers, struggles, or resistance of certain social classes due to their incapability in controlling the mechanism of the production and reproduction of space are performed in everyday life, whereas the privileged enjoys otherwise and reinforces such repressive processes; the potential social change through
re-imagining human-space relations; and the diverse meanings of space which are not only absolute and consequential but socially and historically produced, abstract, imaginative, lived (Lefebvre, 1991), relative, relational (Harvey, 1997; 2006), and symbolic (Cuthbert, 1985), for instance. Cuthbert made such critique at the day when inquiry on high density development in Hong Kong had been already flooded with work conducted along the line of those reductionist conceptions, arguing that ‘[b]ecause of this context, the implementation of ‘solutions’ concentrates on the manipulation of the effects of political action and the alleviation of symptoms, rather than on the creation of policies for structural social improvements.’ (ibid. p.128)

Several examples from the literature can exhibit these issues. Presuming that ‘much of human behaviour is affected by and oriented to spatial features of the physical environment’ (p.18), Mitchell (1971) attempted to discover their linkage including emotional strains. He applied data collected from three large-scale surveys in which interviewees were categorized in accordance with household income, occupancy rate (sq. ft. per person), number of household in a unit, and education level. By using statistical indicators such as ‘happiness’ and ‘worry’, collecting values of variables by asking multiple-choice or yes-no questions like ‘which if the following statements do you think best describe how happy you are these days?’ (p.21) and ‘you are bothered by feeling nervous’ (p.22), and finally calculating correlation coefficient between density levels and other variables, he concluded that strains responded to high density but for low income households only, and the types of housing, amenity as well as housing condition also exerted no impact on strain, implying that ‘density does not have an independent effect on severe forms of strain’ (p.22-23).

Chan (1979) applied stepwise multiple regression analysis to investigate the relationship between dense urban environment and the social relations of individuals. Variables incorporated age, sex, education level and socio-economic status, outdoor and indoor densities, the number of partitioned space and multiple choice questions recorded in Likert scale [e.g. ‘how often did you get together with a lot of your relatives during the past month?’ (p.318)], etc. He found that both outdoor and indoor densities had insignificantly weak effects on ‘individual attitudes and relations with relatives, friends and neighbours’ while part of the correlations existed only when the variable of socio-economic background was in
Yeh and Yuen (2011b) studied the perceptions on living at high rise building of Hong Kong people residing at urban districts and new towns through a questionnaire survey about the satisfaction of different living height, preferred living height, the social and environmental concerns of high rise living as well as the perception of a building as tall or not. They suggested that ‘people apparently adjust to living in super tall buildings through time’ and ‘when the contextual building height environment is gradually predominated by very tall buildings, people are willing to living in them and living higher’, but residential blocks must be pertinently planned, designed and maintained for the minimization of crowdedness and the maximization of sustainability (p.21).

The similarities of their problematic approach lie on an oversimplified understanding on the complexity of human agencies. To define and categorize a person only by individual features, i.e. biological characteristics (sex, age) and socio-economic status (e.g. income reflected by the size of housing unit, education level, etc.) instead of their social roles, and merely as subjects bounded to their living space and interacting with adjacent people with consequential psychological feelings, one overlooks the even more diverse roles, relationships, and interaction (conflictual, competitive, beneficial, etc.) between people, and also their historical and empirical uniqueness in high density space. A person can act as a property owner, a tenant, a landlord, a member of property developer, an administrator of the government, or a shareholder of particular interest group, etc. and once people have adhered to such social identities, the implication of ‘density’ *per se* could differ greatly. For example, for a person residing on such extremely crowded space as cage house, partitioned flat or cubicle, it might mean a physical suffer (not necessarily mental), but for a property developer, it could refer to an abstract process of capital accumulation through a concrete and active process of producing high rise, high density dwelling space. Thus, that to assume it is merely density which affects or interacts with individuals by simple perceptional contacts in single, independent space blurs their ingenuity and active role in shaping, harnessing, experiencing, or even resisting the spatial meanings of ‘density’.

Furthermore, these quantitative studies dealt density with a separated medium such as a flat, a room, and a tower with its external surrounding so that their focus and findings on human conditions would inevitably be bounded to the
phenomenon occurring only within that particular medium. Public housing, as a type of built form, is one of the most common research targets among the literature while there has been a lack of region-based studies in which all sorts of medium of density could be considered as a whole and their relational nexus could be manifested, since the scale of the literature was either too large to consider all the spatial forms and agencies related to density or too small to cover them. Obviously man does not confine their everyday life in a dwelling, and housing is not the sole medium of density. A person experiences (non-)density throughout entire urban reality, where human activities are practiced and concentrated with spatio-temporal variations subject to the features of a particular space (dwelling, workplaces, street space, etc.), people’s own spatial imaginations, and the abstract orders of space. Density should therefore be connected with intrinsic relations to sociality and its total historical-geographical development of urban reality, necessitating a meticulous and sophisticated observation and analysis on their nature.

Accordingly, rhetoric about the merits and the shortcomings of ‘compact city’ or ‘high density urbanism’, and about the significance in modifying urban elements with pertinent planning in order to mitigate negative effects of density, which is widespread in the findings of inquiries on urban planning studies and environmental studies, is also found deficient to fully unfold the complexion of man-space issues.

An extreme example comes from an article by Chau (1981). He as an urban planner defended high density development by supporting the inconclusive relationship between physical density and pathologies, holding that ‘high land value is a matter of demand and supply and has very little to do with the density’ (p.6), and ‘high density is not the direct cause of urban problems’ (p.8). He further enumerated the advantages of high density development while the opposite was hardly mentioned: resources like lands, amenities, and infrastructures are of economic efficiency in use; it helps preserve recreational or rural land and open space; economically liable public transport system can be established and fully utilized due to stable clientele; and it builds up community life with strong social cohesion and interactions, etc. The merits, he argued, hinged on the principle of ‘good planning’: a ‘comprehensively planned and implemented’ development scheme, a sufficient provision of compatible facilities, incessant and pertinent
maintenance and management (ibid.). Similar ideas were seen in others’ work (Pun, 1994; Zhang, 2000; Tong and Wong, 1997; Yeh, 2000; Zhu & Chiu, 2011) but in a relatively balanced way that both the pros and cons were considered. Arguing that planning should not be focused only on physical one, Lee (1981) went one step further to advocate social planning of housing and community life when developing public housing, but it was confined to the establishment of social network and interpersonal relationship between neighbours and within neighbourhood.

In terms of the principles of physical planning for intensive urban development, the literature related to environment sciences and sustainability studies were even purer than their previous counterparts, in the sense that their debates entirely pivoted on the technical and scientific side of density. Ng (2010b), for instance, discussed the proper layout of constructions to achieve optimal ventilation and thermal comfort from the perspective of wind engineering concerning with the permeability of wind and air path between and within buildings.

These findings have not only overwhelmed the academic inquiry on density issues but more importantly diverted our attention to a thought that density is simply a matter of planning effort on physical environments, concealing the nature of planning itself as an ideological and political tool complying with the processes of capitalist mode of production (Cuthbert, 1985), in which its consequences, whether beneficial, neutral, or detrimental, are not homogenously distributed to all affected agents, resulting in more social and political implications beyond the reach of those studies.

Moreover, the temporal aspect of (high) density was also largely dismissed that the literature focused on a fixed moment of condition between space and man, rather than an evolving process of socio-spatiality. If density is interpreted as an assemblage and a link of diverse temporal variations and development of space, practices, and elements affecting such development, some research questions such as ‘the degree of density to which a person can tolerate’ would become problematic, as they selected only one fixed, physical and temporal point. In reality density varies from space to space and time to time (e.g. streets or dwellings; peak hour or business time in daytime or home staying at night, etc.), by which they constitutes a complete everyday life of every inhabitant
experiencing urban intensities differently. Sometimes high density is necessary for vital everyday practices for a certain degree of duration while at some moments it is undesirable in the cases of, for example, overcrowded cubicles and unwanted social contacts. Therefore it is not an ‘either/or’ question of whether density causes any problem or not, or should it be tolerated, but its diverse meanings, varieties and the origins and implications of these phenomena should be investigated, by again placing them to wider urban settings and processes.

2.2.5 Beyond Absolute Space: Density in Processes and Everyday Life

In spite of those narrow conceptions of density adopted by the majority of research, several studies demonstrate alternative approaches in dealing with human-density relationship. Besides Anderson’s (1972) anthropological study, Cuthbert (1985), on the basis of Harvey’s Marxist geographical analysis of capitalist mode of production, distinctively and innovatively brought high density housing forms of Hong Kong back to the perspective of social processes. To him, planning and architecture reflect ideological, cultural, economic, and social processes from the production, reproduction, and perpetuation of spatial patterns of high rise high density buildings. The mechanism and conflicts of capital accumulation in controlling or in relation to the flow of rent, the reproduction of labour force, land ownership and monopoly, property development and market, are all subject to the political decisions and policies of the government, Chinese cultural tradition and its associated psychological processes weakening people’s political resistance or aggression against the government. They had contributed to and facilitated the form of high density development in Hong Kong. As evidences he applied cases of four public housing estates showing how social processes have resulted in their own layouts and interior architectural design, as opposed to speculative private property development. Nevertheless, although Cuthbert had been well-informed with the multifaceted theories of space, also introduced in his work, his analysis was still built heavily upon physical space, i.e. spatial forms of architecture, and regarded it as an outcome induced from different coalescences of social processes instead of as a part of the process, and with weak historical connection among the processes. Despite this flaw, his work has still provided a pioneering and insightful attempt to decipher the profound meaning of ‘density’
that people usually overlook.

Cheung’s (2000) sociological and ethnographical study illustrates a huge contrast with those technical, quantitative researches. He through participatory observations depicted the daily life of three cage-dwellers living within the same apartment at Tsuen Wan. Widely recognized as humiliating, extremely crowded and undesirable living environment from the lenses of both local and western media, the cage apartment, he however argued, was more than a concentration of substandard spatial elements and setting, as well as psychological reactions and responses to such surrounding. Rather, he

‘observed how societally given spatial classifications, functions, and meanings of the cage apartment have been diverted, interrogated, and transformed, in both quantitative and qualitative senses.’ (p.259),

and concluded that

‘[t]hrough their occupants’ spatial sensitivity and ingenuity in making everyday life possible under impossible conditions, the caged bedspaces were in effect multiplied and diversified, from a mere location or refugee site to a home defined by the tenants’ specific inclinations and purposes.’ (ibid.)

Physical adversities, in his observation, were not necessarily a suffering plight that was a sole element defining living space where the cage dwellers had to be confronting with. They established, however, habitual behaviours, such as seeking consumption and entertainment outdoors or indoors and placing stuff at a particular place, for fully utilizing or evading limited available space, where social interactions and community life accompanied with manifold emotional responses and reactions were shaped. Through these activities the meanings of space were created and articulated. Cheung’s study exemplifies a need of being meticulous in probing into the meaning of ‘space’, which is being harnessed, produced, reshaped, ‘articulated’, felt, and perceived by subjectivity in everyday life. In addition, it complements the meagre academic inquiry on density issue in tenement setting and in turn offers us a glimpse of the active role of human agency coping and living with density.

Probing into human-density relationships even deeper than Cheung did, Rooney (2003), though being a professional of interior design, went beyond the scope of physical elements, presenting a more comprehensive work to decipher the in-depth and convoluted linkages between individuals and their dense living
space. Elucidating first at a macro-level the historical development of housing in Hong Kong, she argued there are spatial knowledge and imaginations that individuals hold towards the methods, decisions, needs and actions of configuring, modifying, and using their dwelling space, moulded by the government’s building policies and regulations, social fashion of lifestyle, traditional Chinese cultural inertia and economic structures. She conducted interviews with fifteen households dwelling in public rental housing flats, investigating their overall arrangement of spatial elements, ways of interacting with their crowded home or other family members within the space, and the underlying rationale and consideration of such configurations and actions. The results reveal that their decision-making processes and perception on space were not only affected by the physical conditions of flat and residents’ own needs, but also by socially created expectations competing with each other through time and through the alteration of family structure, life stages, knowledge, emotions, experiences, values, education level, endowment, religious beliefs, and cultural and personal ‘conscious model’ derived from particular social system (p.120-121), etc. To her, therefore, ‘high density space is never static’ but ‘constantly changing’ (p.134, 197). Her work gave respondents an opportunity to articulate, whether verbally or behaviourally, the imaginations on space and density instead of superficial information collected by the scholars for any quantitative operation. However, this study, again, solely focuses on indoor space rather than external one where density issues are also manifested.

In sum, the discussion has attempted to reveal current situation of the concept of ‘density’: the domination of absolute space, the constricted spatial interpretations and representations of density (e.g. visualized, statistical forms), the shrieking, oversimplified role, agency, and relationship of individuals vis-à-vis the space, and the weak socio-political implications on the (re)production of high density space. While alternative academic inquiries have been undertaken to widen the dimension of density, if not totally unproblematic, a need for a reconceptualization beyond the dichotomy of physical density and perceived density, and of absolute space and mental space has arisen.

2.3 Literature on Historical and Socio-Physical Development of Sham Shui Po

This section discusses the literature of Sham Shui Po. SSP plays a relatively
insignificant, if not utterly neglected, role in qualitative geographical inquiries in Hong Kong, let alone critical urban studies. No such research has been conducted on the issue of density in SSP while given its distinctive historical context, socio-economic and living conditions, research focus of SSP has largely been laid on, for instance, history, social issues including poverty and urban lifestyle, building conditions, and the social aspects of architectural development, etc. ‘High density’ in these discourses, consistently, is simply a fact acting as the descriptions of a particular physical space, within which residents’ everyday life is practiced and actions for amelioration should be undertaken by relevant institutions. Worse still, it is for many cases even largely ignored in their discussions except a few sentences as a background for introducing the general situation of SSP.

Nevertheless, some of the literature, especially on history, social and physical urban development, can still inform this research with their elemental factual information of SSP in relation to ‘density’ and social structure—on condition it should be merged into wider socio-spatial processes, in which human stands on the centre of them, dialectically (re)producing spaces and shaping the nature of persons themselves through time. The literature discussed below is limited to those explicitly taking SSP district as a research subject.

2.3.1 Social and Physical History

The notion that urban density is a dynamic development implies temporal process as one of the forces generating such phenomenon, thus necessitating an investigation on its histories in relation to, for instance, the evolvement of the materiality and of the socio-economic establishments.

There are at least three works explicitly on the history of SSP (Smith, 1995; Ip, 1998; Leung, 2011). Both Ip’s and Smith’s work are highly descriptive yet with separated time-span. While Ip’s introductory pamphlet focused the history more on post-war era, Smith traced it back from pre-colonial age to the early twentieth century, revealing rich historical foundation and information about the origin of the high density development of SSP district. Ip depicted its alterations of housing situation regarding several early resettlement estates, public estates, and private properties, as well as of socio-economic and community activities, providing a first glimpse into high physical density as a general way of life despite
varying experiences among social groups. However, given the scope of this work as a general historical account, it lacks of in-depth analysis on the processual aspect of individuals and institutions, whereas it merely describes a linear historical change of human and physical landscapes.

Leung’s monograph, despite more temporally completed and well-rounded factual account on the socio-physical transformation and development of SSP, suffers from the same problems as Ip’s work does. Nevertheless, provided his comprehensive and in-depth discussion on the factual side of SSP rarely found on other literature, his work will act as one of the major sources of historical information for this research.

On the contrary, Smith (1995) through archives and government records unfolded with many details SSP’s land use, social and economic activities, land trade and exchange between landlords and other clans, and disputes over the ownership of land on which many old villages were erected, during the days before SSP was leased to British Hong Kong in 1898. He further explained that beginning from the early twentieth century syndicates or land investment companies had already been active in land acquisition and private property development, encouraged by the colonial government which also implemented reclamation and improvement scheme for several times and showed concern on housing conditions in relation to the issues of overcrowding, public health and industrial development (p.186-187). His study manifests the ways how administrative institutions and the capital of private developers through time shaped and commodified the space of SSP from its original rural land practices in the early days of colonial era, by which its general urban layout, highly influential on the production of intensive building space, was determined. Unfortunately, his discussion did not touch on post-war era which is spatially and socially more relevant to the recent situation of SSP due to institutional transformations. To unfold this part of history for further theoretical analysis, therefore, more sources of information, such as archives available from the Government Records Service (GRS), are required.

2.3.2 Architecture and Housing

In SSP, two types of physical setting, which are typical in the region, have attracted several investigations: the dilapidated tenement buildings and their
surrounding streetscapes (Society for Community Organization (SoCO), 2008; Yiu and Ng, 2008; Liang, 2008; SPCAHKU & Policy 21, 2011; Woo & Hui, 2011; Caritas Hong Kong Grassroots Development Project, 2013). They epitomized the architectural aspect of SSP as one of the major physical mediums by which high density is manifested, visualized and, through residents’ daily activities, practiced. Architecture, no doubt, is one of the most substantial physical manifestations of urban density, and thus it is crucial to understand how the literature treated or (mis)represented it, necessitating a reinterpretation on these sorts of physical setting.

Firstly, literature on housing with ‘absolute space’ approach could still be found. SPCAHKU and Policy 21 (2011) and Caritas Hong Kong Grassroots Development Project (2013) respectively presented their own survey on the conditions and situations of subdivided flats, widely known as a kind of inadequate dwelling, and their residents in SSP. Through questionnaires and interviews, they acquired information about the socio-economic background of residents, the physical conditions of living environment, financial difficulties, reasons and concerns for living at subdivided flats, perception on public security, and relationship with neighbours, neighbourhood and community, etc. Their reports suggested that the renters generally suffered from substandard and unpleasant environment, relatively high rent in proportion to their monthly income, and long-waiting but unfulfilled application for public housing. Whilst SPCAHKU and Policy 21 entirely focused on better distribution of material resources and the amelioration of facilities and interior building environment, Caritas Hong Kong Grassroots Development Project emphasized on the security of tenure, rent control, and the provision of temporary dwelling in substituting public housing in a short-term. This is again a de-politicizing approach cutting off all socio-political implications behind the (re)production of such highly dense spaces of subdivided flats while the relationships between inhabitants and dwelling space were simplified to those of mental or physical perception and reaction, as well as material need.

On the other hand, there are works concerning with a wider social context of housing: Yiu and Ng (2008) well documented the origin, form, layout, and features of tenement, arguing that it ‘provided for the huge influx of immigrants, making use of scarce land effectively by means of high density, terraced
commercial/residential complex’ (p.20). SoCO (2008) demonstrated how these high density urban fabrics shaped or confined the way of life, the practices of local economies, and the performances of social relations and activities. Woo and Hui’s (2011) defined several architecture in SSP like heritages, roads and community complex as ‘permanences’ which should be persevered as the ‘generators of historic continuity’, ‘basis of a generative urban armature’, and ‘guides for future development decisions’ (p.101). Certainly they were aware of the intangible dimensions of architecture such as values, personal experiences and feelings, as well as the influences of local cultures, together determining the nature and significances of a particular building space, but these brief accounts were still overshadowed by strongly physical space-led discussions, built upon a ‘nostalgic’ yet narrow approach in understanding SSP: the historical values and the social meanings of the aged tenement buildings where vital social and cultural life took place were overly accentuated.

Obviously, SSP is more than those elements: there are always underlying structural processes and mechanisms in action, altering SSP simultaneously. For instance, the development of modern high rise private properties and the demolition of dilapidated tenements due to urban renewal, which is a key process in reshaping SSP, can be regarded as contradictory and conflictual capitalist processes, in which diverse actors such as the government, property owners, tenants, and private developers compete for, resist on, or defend their ability of producing and reproducing building spaces and social practices within them. It therefore entails a departure from the trap of imagining SSP as simply a mixture of static constructions with society and cultures, but further a junction of socio-spatialities, whether from the past or newly created, by which a great deal of forces are ceaselessly contributing to transforming the urban.

2.3.3 Social Issues

Sham Shui Po district is nowadays shrouded in its negative images of poverty concentration, urban underclass, widespread aged and dilapidated buildings, and new arrivals from the Mainland China with economic difficulties, etc. They are naturally the focal issues for social researchers, but the question is how these social issues can be reinterpreted from geographical (spatial) and processual perspective playing a role in producing these issues, and what are the
relations between urban density and them. This of course requires further analysis which cannot be found in the existing literature as they are generally built upon a simplified urban-social framework. Three researches were conducted respectively on poverty (Wong & Lam, 2005), consumption behaviours of low income households (MacPherson & Chan, 1996), and urban community life with a multidisciplinary approach (Central Policy Unit, 2012).

The report presented by MacPherson and Chan (1996) was aimed at discovering the expenditure patterns and the degree of life satisfaction of low income households, divided into four expenditure groups with accordance to their monthly income. They found that households with earning below the line of basic need and those between the line of basic need and minimum standard of living were at the most disadvantageous position, as spending and choices for resources and materials, such as food and clothing, were extremely restrained. It was followed with limited social contact, leisure activities, non-essential spending like sport and entertainment due to the offset and the priority to the expenditure on necessities as a strategy of their livelihood, though the majority of interviewees expressed high satisfaction on their situation probably owing to low expectation on living standard and ‘the effective management of their resources’ (p.39).

Wong and Lam (2005) depicted the contour and the general circumstance of poverty of SSP district, through categorizing households by a set of poverty lines defined by a particular percentage of household median income in Hong Kong and further subdivided by the numbers of household member respectively. Their major argument is that a community should not only be described, from a need-based point of view, as impoverished, problematic, void, and needy, but also from an asset-based perspective concerning with the resources, skills, and abilities of residents (p.5-6). In terms of the ‘need’, the findings reveal that social facilities and amenities were in scanty; financial supports and their information for the new arrivals, the elderly or the unemployed were demanded; and diverse social networks or capitals should be established. On the other hand, as far as ‘asset’ is concerned, they suggested that, for example, the pre-existing vacant buildings could be reused or revitalized for creative, cultural industries, local economies and cooperatives, or social services to efficiently utilize human resources like low-skilled or jobless labours, retired elders with plentiful social experience in order to deepen the social capitals and to economically empower the poor.
Obviously the issue of density and its social processes did not take a place in their discussions, despite a fact that, as showed in these studies, the urban underclass in SSP, spatially and economically deprived, is relatively prone to confront with highly dense living environments such as subdivided flats. At the same time, impoverishment and living condition were however simplified as a matter of man-material relation and condition linked through demands and social networks, such as a locale where things are concentrated and consumed. As a result individuals’ living situation, in their narrations, was detached from their origin: the socio-spatial processes rendering even more social identities and socio-economic features and differentiations than these studies assumed.

On the other hand, Central Policy Unit (2012) presented a multidisciplinary study on SSP district, except some of the research questions and findings similar to abovementioned work, including a geographical analysis exploring ‘the manners in which local residents relate themselves to the places they live and how they derive life satisfaction as a result’ (p.v), and the social relations between communities with different housing and geographical features to discover if social and spatial segregation exists. Unlike the previous two researches it concerns more on housing situations, showing that socio-spatial divisions between people with specific type of housing and socio-economic background was exacerbating. It is manifested socially through the varying degree of social participation and capital, and spatially by a clear-cut planning for private properties isolating themselves from other sorts of housing. Furthermore, it argues that space and place of the district has close relationship with the pattern of everyday life. For example, grassroots are highly dependent on the markets at central SSP, providing convenient and inexpensive consumption for daily accessories, leisure and entertainment, by which they gain satisfaction and incentive to stay at SSP. Accessibility and efficient transport facilities to the market of central SSP, as a landmark for them, are thus crucial.

Notwithstanding an absence of deeper and further elucidation on the way of urban social practices of residents in relation to their living space and a reliance again on an interpretation of man-space relation through materialist needs and distributions instead of their origins, this research at least reveals more intricate social composition of SSP and the differentiated ways of life. To imagine urban density with not only monotonic, static physical setting but also a social
complexity renders the issue of density internally more complicated: it is not simply a phenomenon of people clustering in a space, but also an element of everyday life, behind which its forms and influences on individuals or groups are dependent on, reproduced, and generated by diverse forces, practices, and imaginations, varying from oneself or one group of people to another, and are juxtaposed in the same space while changing through time.

All in all, these perspectives point towards an alternative theoretical framework linking up all mentioned elements. To break through the problematic spatial imaginations, the questions of how persons practice everyday life in space-time, how space is imagined and represented, how space is lived with meanings and values, being competitive, contradictory, or compromised, and how these elements are related to each other, should be investigated in order to fully understand the nature of high density—as specific spatio-temporalities, as will be elucidated in the next chapter.

2.5 Summary

This chapter has investigated the nature of the literature on urban density development in Hong Kong and historical, social, and architectural development in SSP. For the former, it has explained the trend of academic interest on the density research since the 1960s, highly subject to scholars’ ontological assumptions conceptualizing ‘density’ as absolute space: physical density and perceived density. Based on such approach, the literature reveal themselves with a deficiency of oversimplified man-space relations and fragmented, unrelated historical events, in turn concealing diverse social implications derived from high density urban development as socio-spatial processes. It is also argued that the literature provides useful factual accounts on SSP’s social and spatial development, but if their origins and relations are to be revealed, they must be connected to a wider theoretical framework comprehensively considering SSP’s historicity, spatiality, sociality, and their internal relations.
Chapter 3
Analytic Framework and Methodology
Towards a Lefebvrian Interpretation of Urban Density Development

3.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter several notions and concepts for refining the approach of analysing urban density development in SSP have been elicited yet without a systematic discussion and clarification for a full theoretical framework. The aim of this chapter is therefore to lay out a comprehensive and organized analytic framework centred upon, but not confined to, Henri Lefebvre’s theory of ‘the production of space’ (POS). Urban geographers, such as Harvey and Soja who contributed to two major readings of Lefebvre, i.e. the urban political economy approach and the postmodernist approach (Kipfer, Kanishka, Schmid, & Milgrom, 2008), since the 1970s, have endeavored to apprehend and apply his rich, diverse, extensive yet highly interwoven theoretical concepts in urban study. He was however criticized for his obscure and inconsistent writing, resulting in massive work and attempts on interpreting Lefebvrian theories in a more coherent way, with more or less discrepancies in understanding these concepts among scholars (Bulter, 2012:3; Molotch, 1993:893). In order to construct a framework for analysing high density spaces of SSP, thus, this chapter provides a synthesis of several scholars’ work, with citations and references of Lefebvre’s original writing and ideas (mainly English translations), and meanwhile attempts to maintain theoretical consistency and to avoid any contradictory notion derived from differentiated or contextually dependent interpretations.

This chapter comprises two sessions. Firstly there will be an introduction to all essential conceptual elements. They are substantial assumptions about the ontology of the urban, i.e., the way of imagining the urban dynamics and nature, and the interrelations between urban space, history and society. These concepts, mainly proposed by geographers who have also been inspired by Lefebvre, simultaneously rearticulate the basis of his theories. It is followed by the explanation of Lefebvre’s spatial trialectics. Based on these theoretical elements, in the second part an analytic framework is elucidated and contextualized, concerning the scope of research area and of theoretical and empirical contents in
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relation to SSP, the methodological considerations on the approach of analysis, the arrangement of arguments, as well as the methods of collecting data and information.

3.2 Conceptual and Theoretical Elements

3.2.1 The Nature of the Urban

3.2.1.1 Spatiality, temporality, and sociality

There are three fundamental elements constituting the urban: spatiality, temporality, and sociality. It is of utmost importance to interpret the principles by which they interact with each other to produce, reproduce, represent themselves, and in turn render unique urban realities, as Soja (2010) argued that

‘[a]ll theories are rooted in ontological assumptions about human existence and the nature of the world in which we live.’ (p.69)

He also suggested that

‘[s]pace and time, along with their more concrete and socially constructed extensions as geography and history, are the most fundamental and encompassing qualities of the physical and social world in which we live.’ (p.15)

Besides acting as a passive ‘container’ or context, spatiality constructs the quality of human and the medium of physical, mental, and social world incorporating with their limits, ‘rules’ or ‘laws’ that each individual has to comply with (Bulter, 2012:42). Human being is also inevitably embedded in sociality: social contexts and relations are influencing and influenced by the nature of space with positive, neutral or negative effects. He further pointed out that ‘as intrinsically spatial beings from birth, we are at all times engaged and enmeshed in shaping our socialized spatiality and, simultaneously, being shaped by them.’ (Soja, 2010:18)

Thus, human, as an essential component of (urban) sociality, not only exists in space but actively, collectively, and purposefully (re)produces space, in accordance with their own conceptions of space and time. In other words, space (spatiality, spatial relations, and spatial structures) is socially produced, and meanwhile societies are embedded on and manifested through spaces. In addition, space and society intrinsically are related to and produced through temporality:

‘It is over time that we also create our collective selves, construct the
societies and cultures, polities and economies within which our individual experiences are expressed and inscribed. Time and its socially produced outcome, **history**, almost self-evidently define human development and change, create problems and solutions, motivate, complicate, expand, and eventually extinguish our being.’ (p.15, emphasis added)

It is thus crucial to recognize that spatiality (geography), temporality (history in general and the rhythms of urban society in specific), and sociality, at various scales, are mutually constitutive under a condition that no one is *a priori*, intrinsically superior to others. This is what Soja called ‘the assumption of a three-way ontological balance’ (2010:71).

Then, this assumption necessitates a further discussion on the mechanism by which the three elements are connected intangibly to create and transform the urban. At first sight city manifests itself in fashion of various forms and scales of such physical spaces as architectures, pedestrian streets, and transport networks, with their own material density, where human activities and social relations are contained in these spaces.

To go one step further, Harvey (1996), firstly from a physical point of view, depicted that ‘[a]s a physical artefact, the contemporary city has many layers. It forms what we might call a palimpsest, a composite landscape made up of different built forms superimposed upon each other with the passing time.’ (p.49). A temporal dimension of the urban is added but from this perspective the urban is still a collection of ‘things’, ‘outcomes’ in various forms, presenting themselves at a sequential and chronological order, fixed within and occupying different spaces. This remains a relatively static way of observing the urban reality, and is just slightly better than the ‘absolute’ approach in imagining space, time, and society, mentioned with a plenty of examples in the literature review, as metaphorically a neutral vessel which is objectively, scientifically and abstractly representable (Harvey, 1997). Such rudimentary perspective apparently captures merely a part of the urban reality. To go beyond such conception, if not to substitute, the urban elements should therefore be enriched and conceptualized through incorporating with three more concepts: **process**, **dialectics**, and **relationality**.

### 3.2.1.2 Social processes, dialectics of the urban, and relationality

Harvey (1996; 1997; 2006) urged to invoke a processual and dialectical thinking in imagining the urban dynamics. He unequivocally asserted that
'process take precedence over things. We should focus on processes rather than things and we should think of things as products of processes.’ (Harvey, 1997:21) Process implies becoming, (re)production, transformation, and/or continuity of all ‘thingness’ (e.g. materiality and corporeality) through time. Process includes socio-political organizations, social relations, interactions, and practices among agents who are living with imaginations, meanings, ideas, and ideologies. ‘Processes’ and ‘things’ in social sense therefore embrace and define their own spatio-temporality, meanwhile being subject to the rules, manifestations, and conceptions of the very spatio-temporality in certain ways and with certain purposes (p.22). In other words, the relationship between them should not be in a one-dimensional way that ‘processes influence things’, but in a dialectical one:

‘[F]rom a dialectical standpoint, the relationship between process and thing becomes complicated because things, once constituted, have the habit of affecting the very processes which constituting them…The ways that particular ‘thing-like structures’…precipitate out of fluid social processes and the fixed forms these things then assume have a powerful influence upon the way social processes can operate.’ (p.21)

In a more concrete sense, Gottdiener (1993) suggested, ‘every mode of social organization produces an environment that is a consequence of the social relations it possesses…[B]y producing a space according to its own nature, a society not only materializes into distinctive built forms, but also reproduces itself.’ (p.132)

At this point it is able to reassert the relation of spatiality, temporality, and sociality in urban realm: a society is manifested and defined through producing spatio-temporalities, while the latter embodies the very society, by embedding and internalizing processes and things to space and time. If spatio-temporalities have been altered, new social things and social processes came, vice versa. Following the transition these kinds of relation will be reshaped (Harvey, 2006:123). Societies are therefore never static and spatio-temporalities, once formed, strike to perpetuate, transform themselves in order to survive the flux of and conflicts within societies. This is how Lefebvre sees the society as an ‘open totality’, ceaselessly subject to the processes of change by the human being (Bulter, 2012:17).

Finally, from a processual point of view, urban also reveals it relationality. This concept originated from Leibnitzian philosophy holding that space is ‘a set relations determined by the objects and processes that constitute it’ (Butler,
Harvey elaborated that:

‘The relational notion of space-time implies the idea of internal relations; external influences get internalized in specific processes or things through time…An event or a thing at a point in space cannot be understood by appeal to what exists only at that point…A wide variety of disparate influences swirling over space in past, present and future concentrate and congeal at a certain point…to define the nature of that point.’ (ibid. p.123-124, emphasis added)

This perceptive also reveals a relational nature of city that it consists of, instead of merely one, multiple spatio-temporalities (or social space-time) through which contested and conflictual social processes are manifested. Lefebvre specified it with examples that

‘we are…confronted by an indefinite multitude of space, each one plied upon, or perhaps contained within the next: geographical, economic, demographic, sociological, ecological, political, commercial, national, continental, global.’ (Lefebvre, 1991:8; Ng, Tang, Lee & Leung, 2010:413)

Then, to synthesize, the urban is understood as

‘a set of conflictual heterogeneous processes which are producing spatio-temporalities as well as things, structures and permanencies in ways which constrain the nature of social processes. Social processes, in giving rise to things, create the things which then enhance the nature of those particular social processes.’ (Harvey, 1997:23)

From the perspective of individual, Schmid (2008) pointed out that Lefebvre also rested his theory of social space on such relational concept of space and time. To Lefebvre, to conceive a society as solely a totality of human bodies, materials, actions and practices in space-time without relational thinking is problematic and misleading, since:

‘Central to Lefebvre’s materialist theory are human beings in their corporeality and sensuousness, with their sensitivity and imagination, their thinking and their ideologies; human beings who enter into relationships with each other through their activity and practice.’ (ibid.)

Therefore, once social spaces and times have been produced by individuals with distinct social features, ideologies, practices, and corporeality, they together exert influences on and establish dialectical relations with each other, while the question of what kinds of influence and relation are depends on their own nature.

These elements will act as theoretical assumptions and foundations interweaving throughout the discussion on high density urban space of SSP in the following chapters, concretized by Lefebvrian theory of ‘the production of space’
as a general analytic framework. The explication below reveals the nature of *social space*, as an extension of the significances of spatiality which incorporated with the physical, the mental, and the social.

### 3.2.2 The Production of Space

To Lefebvre a Cartesian and Kantian spectre still haunts in spatial imagination, that is, the deficiencies of interpreting the urban space of density as simply physical, material dimension and/or mental conception of quantified measurement of spatial conditions, as oversimplified social-spatial relationships, and as a target of top-down, technocratic planning effort. This necessitates a critique and a reconceptualization of social space (Elden, 2004:186-7; Lefebvre, 1991:1-2).

To abandon the problematic dichotomy of and the overemphasis on the perceived (concrete physical reality) and the conceived (abstract mental realm) space without dismissing their substantiality, Lefebvre put forward a unitary theory of space, which is a conceptual triad comprising of three dialectically (or alternatively, ‘trialectically’) and processually interacting elements: *perceived spaces* or *spatial practice*\(^2\) from a physical aspect, *conceived spaces* or *representations of space* from an abstract-mental aspect, and *lived spaces* or *representational spaces* from a social-symbolic aspect (Bulter, 2012:40; Gottdiener, 1993:132). Through this theoretical tripartite Lefebvre intended to ‘demystify capitalist social space’ by exposing its complex inner dynamics of social relations at all levels (Gottdiener, 1993:131; Merrifield, 2000:171), whether ‘in interaction, in conflict, or in alliance with each other’ (Schimid, 2008:33). As a ‘spatial unity’ they are indispensable and inseparable that they must relate themselves to the other two through temporality and sociality, generating an ever-changing social space, and without each of them an analysis of social space will fall into a mere abstraction (ibid.).

\(^2\) The term ‘perceived space’ should be distinguished from ‘perceived density’, discussed in the literature review, which merely refers to a mental and psychological response to physical density.
3.2.2.1 Perceived space/ spatial practices

In the first place, spatial practices involve material-corporeal occupation of space and ‘the use of the body’ (Butler, 2012:125), and when going deeper it concern with how individuals interact with the spaces of materiality through time. To Lefebvre, spatial practices are the processes of the practices of human activities and behaviours, as a totality of social life. These practices include repetitive routines, the temporality of everyday life and (re)production processes, the collective patterns of networks of human movement, communication, and social exchange (e.g. the connections of workplace, dwelling and leisure space of the urban), etc. To individual, it also corresponds to the perceivable aspect of space, that is, the sensory perceptions on material reality surrounding them. Through spatial practices a society preserves its certain degree of cohesion and continuity which can be subject to alteration from the influences of conceived spaces and lived spaces (Bulter, 2012:40,125; Soja, 1996:66; Schmid, 2008:36, 39; Merrifield, 2000:174-5).

3.2.2.2 Conceived space/ representations of space

The representations of space, as Butler (2012) summarized, ‘reinforce dominant epistemological conceptions of body’s relationship to nature and its social environment’ (p.125). According to Lefebvre, they are ‘tied to the relations of production and to the ‘order’ which those relations impose, and hence to knowledge, to signs, to codes…’ (Lefebvre, 1991:33), and are also ‘conceptualized space, the space of scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers, as of a certain type of artist with a scientific bent—all of whom identify what is lived and what is perceived with what is conceived…This is the dominant space in any society (or mode of production). Conceptions of space tend…towards a system of verbal (and therefore intellectually worked out) signs.’ (ibid. p.38-9);

From these statements, the representations of space are the forms of abstract, ‘objective’ knowledge of space, a conceptualized and thus conceived space, related to ‘formal and institutional apparatuses of power involved in the organization of space’ (Bulter, 2012:40). The knowledge is articulated and manifested through intellectual codes, sign, discourses, texts, as well as languages
and speeches, such as descriptions, definitions, theories, maps, pictures, and plans, etc. The representations of space are produced, harnessed by the socially recognized, professionally trained experts and specialists, who decipher and interpret perceived space and lived space through a ‘technocratic rationality of science’ (ibid., p.41). They seek for “appropriate” reflection of the material reality that surround us’ (Harvey, 2006:131), contemplate and reduce them to orderly abstractions and quantified models, and in turn have a tendency to homogeneously impose upon social space, where everyday life is practiced, the conceived spaces as dominant ideology through state power and market mechanism in order to achieve social control, regulation, and surveillance. As a result social space under capitalist city is fragmented, divided at the authorities’ disposal, and is not interpreted as an ontological or epistemological unity. Social space can be perceived after it has been conceived in thought in prior (ibid. p.40-1; Soja, 1996:67; Schmid, 2008:36-7; Ng et al., 2010:413).

3.2.2.3 Lived space/ representational spaces

Finally, Lefebvre elucidates representational spaces that they

‘[embodies] complex symbolisms, sometimes coded, sometimes not, linked to the clandestine or underground side of social life…’ (Lefebvre, 1991:33),

and are also

‘[spaces] as directly lived through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of the “inhabitants,” and “users,”…This is the dominated—and hence passively experienced—space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate. It overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects. Thus representational spaces may be said…to tend towards more or less coherent systems of non-verbal symbols and signs.’ (ibid. p.39)

In contrast to the objective side of the representations of space, representational spaces do more with complex symbolic dimensions of space, which are in Soja’s (1996:67-8) term ‘real-and-imagined’, derived from all members of a particular society, including subjective experiences, imaginations, memories, emotions, psychologies, feelings, as well as values and meanings, in relation to space where human beings practice their everyday life, etc. (Harvey, 2006:131) This space is ‘real’ as lived and subjective experiences cannot be generated without medium, that is, material space and spatial practices, so as to allow the users of space
simultaneously produce and impose their symbolic significances, or ‘the imagined’, from and on the space. Thus, the real and the imagined, or ‘things’ and ‘thought’, are of equal importance (ibid.). In addition, conceived space from bureaucratic power and authorities will attempt to intervene in, rationalize, and in turn dominate, rule, and control the lived space in order to lead individual to obey with abstract orders. The latter, however, also brings out creative spatial practices and social resistance against the former, revealing the alternative ways of using and organizing space as the means of struggles (Soja, 1996:68; Merrifield, 2000:174; Bulter, 2012:40).

These three elements are not discussed independently but developed in a synthetic way, built upon information accumulated along each chapter. They help to identify and depict the total historical processes, at various geographical levels, of producing social spaces comprising SSP as high density social space, as well as to analysis how the latter as a whole is (re)produced and transformed by the interactions of those spatial elements, and especially how different spaces and spatial implications are contested, contradicted, reconciled, or compromised with individuals or agencies, rendering phenomena such as domination, disappearance or perpetuation, etc. Since this theoretical tripartite is context-dependent, its multifaceted, in-depth implications as the consequences of the interactions of spatial tripartite will be further developed, extended and illustrated throughout the analysis on the socio-spatial development of SSP. Built upon these conceptual elements and a reconciliation between conventional spatial imagination and Lefebvrian formulation, the next session elaborates an analytic framework and its methodological concern, the content of analysis, and the arrangement of arguments.

3.3 Analytic Framework

3.3.1 Delimiting Research Area

To avoid confusions, a clarification of research area is necessary in prior. The research area is comprised by two parts: study area and core study area. The core study area is delimited to Sham Shui Po region only, as one of the geographical regions in Sham Shui Po district, but not the entire district, as an administrative region of district council which is frequently used by general public interchangeably with the former, covering for instance Sham Shui Po, Cheung Sha
Wan, and Shek Kip Mei defining the boundary of a larger study area. More specifically, tertiary planning units (TPUs), as shown in figure 3.1 and 3.2, subdividing the SSP district into smaller regions, are applied, in which three of them are selected as core study area: the inner city area in upper 2.6.6, 2.6.7, and a small portion of 2.6.5 adjacent to 2.6.6, where government, institution and community (G/IC) buildings and a commercial building lie. With TPU 2.6.1, 2.6.2, and 2.6.3, they jointly comprise the study area. For comparisons, public housing estates, Lai Kok Estate (in 2.6.5), Fu Cheong Estate (in 2.5.5) and Nam Cheong Estate (in 2.6.6) and Home Ownership Scheme (HOS) court, Yee Ching Court (in 2.6.5), which are adjacent to the core study area, will be discussed as examples for comparison.

The boundary of the core study area is chosen by a preliminarily observation of the features of spatial practices, population density, and the types and conditions of construction in SSP district as a whole.

The figures of population density per square kilometre and the numbers of population, both at street block level, the smallest statistical area available from 2011 census, are first applied. The statistical data from all street blocks are subdivided into five groups by quantile classification. In terms of the absolute number of population at small street block level in 2011 (figure 3.1), SSP district did not reveal a distinct differentiation except the industrial area of Cheung Sha Wan. However, census data shows apparently that SSP region and Cheung Sha Wan region have relatively high population density (figure 3.2).

In terms of physical environment, SSP is an inner city area, mainly for residential and commercial use, comprising mostly tightly packed blocks of post-war short tenement buildings, in which partitioned flats are common, interweaving with a few newly built high rise private properties under redevelopment projects. The street spaces in TPU 2.6.6 and 2.6.7, where diverse, hectic community and commercial activities for necessities or non-essential products lie, attract even more people for consumption than Chueng Sha Wan does. As traffic nodes such as Mass Transit Railway (MTR) are located in this area, SSP is also a substantial and vital field of practicing everyday life and more complicated, hybrid social temporalities of both outsiders and local residents experiencing varying high density social spaces. In terms of its historical development, this region is where Sham Shui Po village, the largest and one of the
earliest human settlement within the district, had ever located, as one of the region immediately subject to the colonial establishment of land development mechanism and legal system after the extension of colonized region of Hong Kong by the British, i.e. the inception of colonial rule of New Territories and New Kowloon. In other words, it has been the longest historically and culturally developed area among the whole SSP district.

Therefore, the inner city area of SSP is chosen as the core study area for its rich historical evolvement and diverse social-material content. The differentiations within SSP’s development provide a relatively well-rounded picture of the processes intrinsically contributing to the ever-changing urban density development, manifested by for example a comparison of individuals’ multifaceted practices of everyday life and physical settings at different times and spaces. In addition, the study area is chosen for its relationality to the core study area, as will be discussed primarily in chapter 5.
Figure 3.1  Population of Sham Shui Po district at small street block level  
(Data source: CSD, 2012b)

Figure 3.2  Study area and core study area, and population density at small street block level in 2011  
(Data source: CSD, 2012b)
3.3.2 Theoretical Analysis and Methodological Considerations

3.3.2.1 Imagining ‘density’ as social spaces: 

The place of physical and perceived density

Then, the meaning of ‘density’ and its intension should be clarified for this research. This research does not deny the validity of the conception of physical and perceived density. They both partially refer to certain phenomena, conditions, and events of space-time. Both physical density and perceived density are hinged on spatial configuration and the condition of material world, while the former without the latter (as subjective perception) will render ‘density’ itself meaningless. Physical density and perceived density should be regarded as two sides of the same coin. It is however a problem that reductionist, isolated imagination of high density development obscures the access to a full picture of high density development, thus necessitating an extended theoretical framework accommodating these concepts.

In this research ‘physical density’ is taken more in a relative sense than in an absolute one. In other words, while the knowledge on physical and statistical relations between human agencies and material settings will not be rejected, this study will however not primarily hinge on quantitative precision and accuracy on numbers and calculations. Rather, the variations of and the comparisons on qualitative features of density will be the focus. It can be subordinated to the realm of ‘spatial practices/perceived space’ under the Lefebvrian formulation, but instead of attenuating on the materiality of SSP, the discussion will focus more on the relations between individuals’ practices and their physical settings.

On the other hand, it is not appropriate to assume that the perceived density, i.e. the superficial psychological response of human agency to micro-level physical-social surroundings, is entirely commensurate with conceived spaces and lived spaces, as such act narrows down their significances. Rather, it should be pertinently regarded as simply one kind of lived space that certain personal values are derived from a psychological process of material stimulation-reaction, as shown later in several cases of interview. The focal point will then be extended to a wider dimension: the spatial meanings and knowledge, which their origin, production, perpetuation, and implication should be discovered.

Density in the following analysis and in the context of SSP can be interpreted as different social spaces consisting of social processes determining their own
qualitative and quantitative features of purposeful concentrations and encounter of people and materials, especially in residential spaces and street-commercial spaces.

3.3.2.2 Unravelling the representations of space

The theoretical analysis begins with deciphering all conceived spaces ever imposed on SSP in producing its abstract aspect of spatio-temporalities of urban intensity. Density has long been formally connected to general technical planning knowledge and capitalist development mechanism with codes, discourse, and exchange value for generating commoditized, fragmented spaces, and symbolic social identities. They are concretized by land and architectural development, through universally implementing, at district level, building standards and its subsidiary or related legal stipulations, as well as the governmental and administrative means and control on density under (non-)statutory planning policies, including layout plans and guidelines, and the mechanisms of zoning. They can be summarized into three elements: the knowledge of planning, the capitalist processes, and legal and administrative regulations. Informally, given the abovementioned approach in defining density, there are more conceived spaces, out of the framework of formal density control, which have likewise contributed to the urban density development of SSP, involving also the spatial practices at relatively smaller geographical levels. They incorporate land administration and development control on its distribution; urban renewal mechanism as an integration of enhanced conceived space strengthening the efficiency of physical reproduction in SSP; and constraints on spatial practices such as squatting, hawking, and illegal constructions.

Therefore, in the next chapter there are four tasks to reveal the nature of such conceived spaces including: first, the epistemological foundation, mainly absolute space approach, by which they manifest themselves and work; second, their historical development and evolution, in order to understand how the knowledge, the codes, and the capitalist ideology have been collaboratively connected, enhanced, and stabilized throughout the history of Hong Kong, from colonial governmentality to recent governance; third, their features and contents which are actually influencing individuals and their physical spaces in SSP; and fourth, more substantially, besides the consequential forms of physical space, their in-depth
implications, including spatial traps, mismatches, stagnancy and the default and disconnection of spatio-temporality, which they are related to the ways and processes of producing physical spaces, and of (re)configuring intricate socio-spatial relations through time, involving conflicts, contradictions, and compliances with spatial practices and lived spaces, in both collective and individual sense. This will be the main line of arguments in chapter 5 and 6.

To construct these arguments it relies on diverse sources of mainly written information including but not limited to government and legislative documents, gazettes, planning guidelines, press-cut, juristic documents and ordinances, maps and plans, as well as statistical data portraying the general situation of research area. Library research is also a major source for empirical data and theoretical content, in which journal papers and book chapters have played a crucial role. Archival research in the Record Services Building of Hong Kong Record Services has also been conducted for more historical documents, such as plans, photos, and certain government reports and memorandum originally restricted for circulation, etc.

3.3.2.3 Tracing historical development of physical spaces and spatial practices

Following the discussion of the conceived spaces, there will be an elaboration on SSP’s historical development of physical spaces and the evolving spatial practices, under various processes and forces. This involves two levels of discussion, from regional and local to individual, and they will be discussed in chapter 5 and 6 respectively.

Chapter 5 focuses on the general configuration of socio-spatialities in forms of collective, large-scale spatial practices deriving and derived from land development mechanism, architectural development, and residential and street-commercial activities, in which they have all been subject to the conceived spaces. Some of the spatial practices and their subsidiary physical settings, created from distant past, remain existing and influential nowadays, while some had disappeared, or been replaced, though their traces and traits still provide certain degree of effectiveness and cohesion on recent material spaces. In other words, it focuses on how densities are produced abstractly in SSP and then manifested physically, through static material spaces and the dynamic practices of everyday life. Spatial practices and physical spaces at regional and local levels reveal
themselves as a trajectory of dialectical transition and as all implications derived from such socio-spatial alterations and interventions of abstract representations. It also concerns with the relations between certain spatial practices and conceived spaces, in which both could be overwhelming to stimulate urban transformations, such as collective resistance on housing and land development mechanism for alternative dwellings, and the subsequent responses of the conceived spaces by renewing and underpinning their own technical and institutional formulation.

Thus, to concretize such discussion, two series of empirical element have to particularly be considered and merged into the discussion on the socio-spatial processes: the major historical events of SSP since pre-colonial era, with relatively natural man-space relations, to recent time as capitalist abstract spaces, and all factors embodying the processes: fluctuating population, their social-material needs, and the qualitative and quantitative nature of all physical spaces related to intensive residential and economic practices.

Chapter 6 will continue the discussion firstly on the aspect of spatial practices in a deeper geographical level, i.e. the individual level to explain and depict at recent time how people with different abstract social identities attach themselves, whether voluntarily or not, to particular residential space and exterior spaces with varying degrees of intensity, embodying their unique everyday practices such as dwelling, working, leisure, and circulation over the spaces, and their spatial strategies or inability for utilizing limited space and escaping from undesirable dense environments.

Regarding the sources of information, empirical data is similarly needed for descriptive contents and theoretical analysis, especially for the historical accounts, which relies particular on several works on SSP’s history, as discussed in the literature review, and archival records and information. Other aforementioned information in written form will also be employed, as will do in the chapter 4. In addition, household and personal based semi-structured interviews have also been conducted to observe and investigate interviewees’ spatial practices and strategies in making use of their dwelling spaces and in experiencing density at their adjacent exterior environments. The outcomes of interviews assist to supplement empirical and subtle data at individual level which cannot be found in written sources. The structure and plan of interviews are elaborated in the next session.
3.3.2.4 Understanding representational spaces and spatial contradictions

The discussion does not end at merely depicting collective and individuals’ multifaceted spatial practices. It finally reveals individuals’ lived spaces imposed on their own reach of physical space in which their everyday life has been practiced. The lived spaces can be collectively shared or personally peculiar depending on one’s history, experiences, and identities through which differences are produced under universally imposed conceived spaces. Lived spaces in this research mainly focus on meanings and values, personal memories, and psychological or emotional conditions attached to residential space, exterior space, and SSP as a whole by a person or a group of people, revealing the significances and importance of those spaces by which people are willing to stay at, to own, or to avert from such spaces.

In addition, as mentioned above, the lived spaces can be contradictory and resistant against the spatial representations by creating new spatial practices. However, the ability of resistance is subject to the conceived spaces as they may be enhanced or too weak to prevent from it. Therefore, chapter 5 and 6 will also discuss the altering relations between spatial representations, lived spaces, and the resultant spatial practices which have been changed historically from collectively successful resistance on housing situation, as shown in chapter 5, to a suppressed personal alternative for unconventional dwelling due to a gradually strengthened and complicated formulation of spatial representation in controlling the production of material spaces, as elucidated in chapter 6.

In chapter 6, contradictions between the conceived space and the personal lived spaces will be elaborated with more details. It is argued that the conceived spaces, as a tool of concretizing capitalist processes and planning knowledge, during their course of evolvement or state of standstill, have contributed to the production of lived spaces, and their physical medium and practices. While some people simply comply with or submit to the spatial representations, some individual lived spaces will not be able to fully compromise or reconcile, but highly contradict with enhanced abstract representations which have nowadays dominated the ability to (re)produce SSP’s urban intensity to sustain and perpetuate themselves. In recent days, the lived spaces of certain groups of agencies are in weak position that they are overwhelmed by the process of reconfiguring social and spatial-temporalities, such as urban renewal mechanism,
while opportunities to break through status quo are erased or withering away. To unfold such individuals’ lived spaces, it again relies on semi-structured interviews.

Totally four cases, involving one household and three individuals, are selected and applied in this research. They were found through purposive sampling and chain referral sampling aimed at those who could cover elements related to density in core study area as many as possible, including residential situations, the types of dwelling such as subdivided flat, tenement flat, private property, and rooftop house, and subsidiary socio-economic identities, such as the place of origin (immigrants from the Mainland China or locals), age, occupation, socio-economic linkages to SSP, etc. Interviews were not only conducted once but several times for each of the interviewees if necessary. Some interviewees were contacted and introduced through local non-governmental organizations such as Society for Community Organization.

As far as interview questions are concerned, the interviews were carried out with open-ended questions, aimed at collecting following information: personal background, the socio-economic status of all household members, the physical conditions of their dwellings and workplaces, their recent and past living experiences, perceptions, feelings about residing in SSP, the ways and strategies of experiencing density and utilizing their own space, their routines and movements in different time periods, their interpretations and comprehension on the concept of ‘density’, reasons for particular spatial practices, and significances and values attached to their spaces with rationales for such attachment, etc. Based on the acquired information, an analysis at individual level is possible to interpret how lived spaces and spatial practices under specific socio-economic features contradicts, defies, or complies with the conceived spaces.

An interview guide was designed for a general flow of questions (refer to appendix). However, based on the response of the informants, the questions were not fixed but changed in accordance with it. Questions were specifically filtered and chosen also depending on the social identities of the interviewees. All interviews have been recorded and transcribed. Analysis will be based on the transcripts, and certain translated dialogues will be directly quoted in the discussion.
3.4 Summary

In responding to the critique in the literature review, this chapter has constructed an alternative approach as an intensive qualitative research to interpret urban density development in SSP centred on Lefebvrian theory of the production of space. Key conceptual elements comprising the ontological nature of the urban, as the foundation of theoretical framework, were explained: these concepts together construct an interpretation of urban totality as dialectical and relational processes of sociality, spatiality, and temporality. Then there was an elucidation on the methods of data collection, such as library and archival research, as well as semi-structured interviews, and on the arrangement of arguments revolving around three key elements constructing social spaces and their spatio-temporalities: the spatial practices, the representations of space, and the spaces of representation.
Chapter 4  
Representing Density  
Conceived Spaces of Density in Hong Kong and Sham Shui Po  

4.1 Introduction  
A physical space in itself, though fully filled with materials, cannot result in ‘high density’ alone. It involves a dialectical process in which persons impose their conceptions on a particular space, i.e. to think and feel that a space is overcrowding, to determine and define their physical surrounding as ‘high density’, and also gain perceptions simultaneously from lived experiences, which are transformed into abstract knowledge and value, rendering a space ‘dense’. One has to hold abstract knowledge and thought regarding the meanings of (high) density beforehand in order to interpret and depict the variety and nature of them. Without human being, ‘density’ loses its significations. A person does not merely passively sense and experience density but through technical and legal means imagines and conceives ‘density’, and also attempts to manipulate, limit, realize, and modify it to be a ‘framework’ of daily spatial practices.  

The representations of space have been generated for multiple aims, like assisting for social control and capitalist processes, and manifested in manifold means for concretization (e.g. planning, administrative and legal means) at different geographical levels (from territorial to individual level). With their own historical development and spatial reach they concurrently influence, mainly in a top-down approach, both the operation and the order of urban spaces and the spatial practices of agents within such spaces.  

With a biased treatment of urban density as mainly or merely physical settings, certain phenomena related to social, dynamic aspects of density are not dealt with directly by those representations but solely as a subordinated occurrence related to certain social issues and their respective conceived spaces in which density might not be the main object of concern, such as street hawker control, yet in fact equally influential on the patterns of human or material concentration and in turn on the processes of everyday life related to spatio-temporal variations of densities.  

They also reveal a nature of producing ideal condition of intensity at the
expense of urban totality, since not all elements of density are simultaneously considered but these abstractions can merely interweave and interact with others contingently. The inevitably incomplete, fragmented and sometimes incompatible interpretations on density form a ‘gap’ between abstract socio-spatial processes and concrete urban reality, generate and in turn impose multiple significances on space where people live their life and project values on it, and as a result contradictions are evoked. The socio-spatial reach of these representations and their implications should therefore be carefully examined.

To unfold such relations, this chapter investigates the conceived spaces of urban density by tracking their epistemological formulation, the historical trajectory of development, the recent situations of implementation in SSP, and more substantially, the implications of the processes of (re)producing density on socio-spatial relations, in order to interpret the nature of social space of SSP where conceived spaces heavily interfere into and mediate the physical, perceived, and lived aspects of SSP.

4.2 Formal Density Control

In this study there are two dimensions to identify the representations of space: from formal controls, i.e. the government’s direct engagement in tackling the forms of physical density, and from informal counterparts attempting to manipulate the ways of producing and allocating physical spaces and to control individuals’ conducts unwittingly related also to urban intensities. This session first deals with the former.

Density, to the Hong Kong government, is largely a matter of managing urban physical space—especially architectural one—and relations between population and it, heavily subject to the conceived rather than the lived spaces of inhabitants. They are propped and influenced by two sets of representations: one is the knowledge of density produced by bureaucratic and academic experts which meanwhile guides the government to define density, to delimit the boundary of related elements and issues, such as land development processes under market economy, population distribution, and building design, and also to determine the ‘values’ and ‘variables’ of density for optimization of the use of space that will benefit and underpin the interests of certain agencies.

The knowledge reveals itself through a medium and a mechanism of urban
planning under capitalist production process, assisting the government to strike for a legitimacy and rationalization to apply the knowledge by stating and modifying technical criteria and rules for achieving ideal urban fabric. To accomplish this, a homogeneous imposition relying on another set of representations is necessary: administrative and legal codes including planning and buildings ordinance, land lease conditions, statutory plans, and planning and zoning guidelines, etc. They are employed to ensure spatial abstractions are appropriately implemented, and meanwhile to perpetuate the ways how the knowledge is produced and the dominated status of such ‘objective’ knowledge of density. These conceived spaces thus go hand in hand to act as a pillar of rigid yet formidable institutional frameworks in guiding the production of urban density.

4.2.1 Density as Knowledge of Urban Planning and Capitalist Processes: Recent Epistemological Formation

4.2.1.1 Density as spatial and developmental concept

The largest and most influential producer of the spatial representations of density lies on planning realm, comprising of related governmental agencies, policies, and institutions coordinated by juristic power in actually managing spatial provision. The content of these representations have been evolving and can be traced as early as the first decade of twentieth century in the case of SSP. To planning practitioners the subject of density and its objects for manipulation should be stable, tangible, and definable, otherwise administrative convenience as well as scientific and technical means for tackling undesired density issues would be up against failure—an approach of absolute space. Then, since the advent and imposition of the planning knowledge for the physical development of Hong Kong, the intension of density has remained constant except its allowed mathematical values which could be negotiable in accordance to transforming social context.

The Planning Department (PlanD) of Hong Kong, for instance, in a technical research paper for ‘Hong Kong 2030’ study, a territorial level planning strategic review, first differentiates ‘perceived density’ from ‘physical density’, stating that ‘[t]o a Hong Kong person, the term “high density” means quite differently than to a foreigner. It is basically a matter of perception. This gives rise to the term “overcrowding”, which is subjective description of a perceived lack of living or personal space...“People” and “space” could be
considered as the parameters defining density under the town planning context.’ (Planning Department, 2003a:2)

Then the discussion is diverted to two kinds of physical density: population density and development intensity (as a relation between building bulk or physical volume and space [ibid.]).

It should however not be only the problem of how they define density, but how these so-called ‘parameters’—people and space in which both should have own intension far beyond urban planning context—are defined at their disposal. Again, in their conception statistical data with fixed spatial distribution exemplifies the existential status of human being, and ‘space’ is a passive container of things, in forms of land and building space, which can be subdivided vertically and horizontally for material allocation. Density under such epistemological framework aims to minimize uncertainty as insignificant as possible: density is the spatial conditions of calculable materials and technically measurable spatial variables, expressed by means of scientific methods. Relativist and subjective judgments, such as ‘high’ or ‘low’ density; and visual, aesthetical impact of erecting a building bulk, are ‘objectivized’, if not able to eliminate personal value thoroughly in making decisions and judgments, by translating them to firm yet arbitrary standards, definitions, indicators, values, or models (e.g. The Metro Planning Committee of the Town Planning Broad [TPB] prepares photomontage to assess possible visual impact of erecting large mass of construction at several fixed points). Ironically, what helps to produce spatial representations and decide the scope of ‘density’ can be subject to those ‘personal values’ which are hardly probable to be manifested or expressed in scientific ways but are also the key any planning process should appeal to.

Despite such deficiencies of the knowledge itself, to be ‘universally applicable’ is substantial to any planning and development decision, for a common ground that can be commensurate with any technical language from different sectors within a complicated urban system is more reliable than appealing to totally subjective opinion on development intensity, when it comes to a prevention of unnecessary controversy in conducting actual engineering and building works and enhancing efficiency in land (re)development.

Under those considerations, density as the subject of urban planning knowledge has been formally represented in technical physical dimensions of
Chapter 4  Representing Density

space: the attributes of building (i.e. height, volume, gross floor area [GFA], the size of flats, occupancy density and rate, the qualities of internal or external contents, etc.) and surface area of developable land (i.e. net site area [NSA], site coverage, and in opposite, land area specially disregarded or exempted from NSA or GFA). The indicator of ‘plot ratio’ has been further derived from them and fully employed in legal form since 1966, as one of the most influential referential point of development control, or control of ‘materiality’.

Moreover, density relates itself with the magnitude of ‘development’: in its purest form, to the government, at least under Hong Kong’s context regardless of any historical variation and innovation such as the so-called ‘sustainable development’, development largely refers to ‘anything in the nature of construction operation which involves the erection and alteration of buildings and engineering works on, above or underground’, and ‘any material change in the use of existing buildings or land, which may or may not involve construction operation’ (Town Planning Division, Lands Department, 1984:22). In other words, it is ultimately a pursuit of reasonable material transformation and order. Then, density as an object of material condition and transformation is also a gauge for measuring the degree of physical development on land and a control over it is to strike for a balance amongst restrictions including the possibility of socio-environment modification, financial feasibility in exhausting development potential, and maximum development scale within which a continuity of social dynamics and reproduction without severe urban pathologies is possible.

4.2.1.2 The role of human agency

There is also a technical dimension of ‘man’ as a reductionist conception of the nature of inhabitants. Despite an intrinsically complicated nature of human agency, in planning processes or in judging and determining spatial standards, its significance is filtered, simplified to be ‘population’: first as an actual or estimated statistical number at regional and household level, with which more complex and intricate qualitative differentiations, such as identities, socio-economic features of individuals, personal values, and unpredictably complicated practices, hardly bear significance when considering optimum and maximum number of person comprising the carrying capacity of a space; and second as a stereotypical being, confining themselves to repetitive events of the


‘everyday life’, taking place in each of the fixed points for residential, commercial, transport, community, and leisure use. They should be assigned to a space, in accordance with a tier of standard, designed under certain criteria supposed to be able to optimize the allocation of space and to successfully support their livelihood with minimum resource provision, resulting in specific level of densities but without causing devaluation and depletion of the space and compromising individual minimum living standard.

In sum, to apply the planning knowledge of density is to gradually set up a chain of standard (in form of threshold or maxima) from which acceptable combinations of space with population are estimated mechanically under different scenarios. Adjustment of the standards for space allocation and for physical construction due to the changes of social context by every historical event and fiercely competitive, limited land stock is essential so as to uphold the processes of social (re)production, despite an inevitable negligence of any uncertainty derived from the ever-changing qualitative and quantitative nature of individuals, such as evolving social composition, identities, socio-economic status and spatial practices, etc.

4.2.1.3 Capitalist abstractions and processes

The cost of being simply framed to technical-bureaucratic planning representations at the expense of others is that the knowledge of density must go abreast of and has meanwhile become a tool of coordinating another process, that is, capitalist processes through land market and real estate development and investment on their related industries. Developers, the government and/as landlords, incessantly engage in a cycle of producing new or replacing constructions, facilities and commercial premises, such as housings of any kind and public amenities, in complying with all legal regulations of building and planning control. It is as a result a path SSP has gone through that ever since the early twentieth century its density has physically got rid of its partially natural origin as simple inhabitant concentration for resources and daily life, and confronted with intentional manoeuvres of the space through institutional imposition and intervention of spatial abstractions.

The capitalist process has its own spatial abstractions and attributes, including qualitative and quantitative conditions which can be intrinsically
conflictual, as an essential medium for applying and embodying the knowledge, interpreting spatial issues and indicating the scope the knowledge can be applied. To begin with, space holds both use and exchange value. For the former, space which has the qualities of size, relative location, visual features and environmental settings is subdivided for fulfilling different purposes of its users. For the latter it incorporates for instance the market value of properties, land premium, rents, and costs in altering contents upon the land or conveying land and property ownership, etc. The exchange value hinges on the qualities of space, subject to legal abstractions, and it is attached to more spatial representations, such as identities and eligibilities determining who can or cannot access to certain spaces.

The existence of urban intensity is then to ensure that the market, which interferes a particular space through converting it into commodities or public goods, is capable to operate incessantly and validly for exhausting in reasonable manner spatial resource as much as possible, under constraints from institutions and agents responsible for its operation, if not free from fluctuations and uncertainties derived from the economic and financial cycle. Maximizing exchangeable space for increasing potential users while reducing unnecessary ‘valueless’ space is thus a norm of development (Ho, 2014). Institutional interference over the production and control mechanism of density, which are not mainly aimed to alleviate people’s perceived density or actual physical intensity, but to create while simultaneously maintain the stability of exchange value of land or property by preventing unbalanced supply and undesirable design of space at different geographical locations. Highly intensive urbanism therefore becomes ‘officially’ bearable until it is expected that interests derived from its continuity will be lingering during a certain time-span and a renewal of such space is more financially feasible and advantageous. Then, the question of whether high density in physical sense, and overcrowding in mental sense, should be bore and resolved becomes meaningless but to what level and under what situation it should be preserved in order to uphold and comply with the operation of all abstract orders, despite the fact that some undesirable situations of high density, such as caged house and subdivided flats, have to be maintained.

With a nature of being incapable to fully consider and manifest the urban totality, all abovementioned representations of space, though go hand in hand to dominate social spaces at all geographical levels and with various means or
agencies assisting in imposing themselves on spaces and individuals, have to confront with exceptional operations or intentional ignorance or violation from agencies who are supposed to comply with the representations: albeit mostly reciprocal, they are not always at complete harmony but have to compromise and to be adjusted to achieve reconciliation between each other and deal with any disturbance from ever-changing, historically contingent socio-spatial reality incorporating deviances, exceptions or resistance. For instance there can be internal contradictions within the same process or between capitalist processes and individual interests, and legal control over the way of spatial utilization and reshaping the very space at the expense of others, such as a dispute between landlords and tenants over the tenure, the right to dwelling space and an arbitrary reduction in GFA causing a loss of rent and in turn profit of landlord, etc.

Revealing the epistemological foundation and nature of the conceived spaces as formal density control, the following sessions investigate the processes and the forms of their actual concretizations and the implications of such acts.

4.2.2 Historical Review:

Relationality and Rationales of Formal Density Control

Corresponding to the utilization of the knowledge are rationales about why the governmental agencies should universally conduct density control and planning, relationally determining the space of SSP, in favour of certain dimensions of space. Urban density development has been resulted partially from the shifts of these rationales and of the forms of knowledge concretization, while contrasts among such transformations could be superficially diverse yet homologous in their underlying structure under an identical epistemological foundation. The discussion will also explain how the recent social space of SSP is relationally connected with such historical development of conceived spaces.

4.2.2.1 Early colonial era

The very first direct density control in Hong Kong superficially originated from a practical concern of sanitary and living conditions, influenced by a heightened awareness, in Britain and her colonies, of public health issues due to several outbreaks of epidemics in Europe since the late 1830s (Xue, Zou, Li, & Hui, 2012:556-7). The situation later brought out many legal regulations such as
Public Health Act passed in England in 1848, acting as a reference for transplantation and establishment of Hong Kong’s formal control on construction standard (McInnis, 2000:2).

In Hong Kong, such awareness reached its zenith in the late nineteenth century. The colonizers usually attributed what they thought to be deplorably unhygienic and residentially overly dense Chinese tenements, with poorly designed or even inexistent ventilation and drainage system, and traditional Chinese custom to potential crises of public health and losses of their interests. Socio-political turmoil in China intermittently resulting in diasporas from the Mainland to Hong Kong deteriorated the situation, as the early form of legal stipulation for standardizing building structures were gradually ineffective with rising housing demand and insufficient trained staff rendering loose enforcement (Pryor, 1983:4; Xue et al., 2012:556-7).

By attributing public health issue to the physical deficiencies and nuisance of living space, urban density issues in the earliest history of Hong Kong had already been connected to a matter of regulating building and population, also implying a long-standing contradictory or reciprocal relation between land economic activities including real estate development and speculation, and physical density. Integrating previous ordinances, the Public Health Ordinance 1887 and the Public Health and Buildings Ordinance 1903 (PHBO) (it determined the form of early architectural structures of SSP in new town scheme in the 1910s), though enacting more comprehensive, detailed and stringent stipulations on building density than their predecessors had, were in fact the products of trade-off between political power, economic elites and a threat of pathology on social well-being.

Despite the efforts of Osbert Chadwick, who was a British sanitary engineer appointed twice in 1881 and 1902 to compile reports on the sanitary conditions of Hong Kong, on revealing urgent need in solving the menace to public health through new legislation due mainly to the dreadful building conditions of grassroots Chinese tenements, they were mostly in vain due to heavy impediments from those with vested interests opposing any possible loss of exchange value and rent due to proposed reduction on building volume, plot size, and its interior density (ibid.; Pryor, 1983:18). Not until the outbreak of cholera epidemic in 1883 and bubonic plague in 1894 did the government take Chadwick’s suggestions seriously that, under fierce oppositions and occasional compromise, his
recommendations were, if not fully adopted, accepted and revision had to be done in order to pacify the general public (Pryor, 1983:15; Xue et al., 2012:559-60). Such arduous task of tackling actual environmental issues while balancing the interests of both the European and the Chinese in terms of public health and economic values again reflects incessant and intrinsic conflicts in the production and concretization of spatial representations, i.e. the exchange value of land and property, foreign expertise, and legislation on space in the above case. Each of them, relationally and consistently imposing on and influencing social spaces, serves merely particular aims. It also marks the beginning of a restrictive linkage of density with planning knowledge in Hong Kong.

A colonial government office report shows that the enforcement of the 1903 Ordinance and building regulations in SSP, serving as the first formal density control measure in the place, might similarly share the same concern on public health at first glance, but in fact more practically on economic feasibility in maintaining social order, reproduction and continuity on the other. Several years after the commencement of new town development scheme in SSP, the then Officer Administrating the Government, Claude Severn, in 1918 stated the progress of and his consideration on the replacement of the old, dilapidated Chinese village dwellings in SSP by new tenement houses with better spatial standard complying with the 1903 regulations that, for example, a construction should be rat-proof, with sufficient supply of light and good ventilation (cf. figure 5.5 and 5.6), and then proposed a provision of financial incentive, that is, offering low interest rate to private developers to complete building projects (Severn, 1918; CO-129-450, p.375-6). He expressly suggested that the imposition of spatial representations in tackling actual high density issue should be propped by economic viability since

‘[t]he advantage of such a scheme [i.e. financial incentives] from the point of view of public health would be that the government could insist on the type of house to be built, could limit the number of inmates and could regulate the rents to be charged for each house or part of a house.’ (ibid.)

Again, the Ordinance itself and its enforcement were to the government both an act of compromise and a tool ensuring any material or spatial alteration of urban fabric for ‘appropriate’ intensity and amenity must be validly compelled under economic processes. At this historical stage there had been a three-side checks and
balances in urban density development among social-environmental, political, and economic concern, though their influences were not evenly distributed, and it did not necessarily imply a general elimination of intensive residential condition. The following discussion suggests that the socio-environmental check was gradually undermined as the government showed a persistent biased urban development policy by which land economic development outran the improvement of domestic environmental conditions, especially when it has been no longer, at least superficially, an acute threat of a society.

4.2.2.2 Inter-war era

In the inter-war era, population and housing pressure challenged the validity of previous representations: in 1931 the population of Hong Kong had rose to 840,437 (Xue et al., 2012:562) and 79% of them were urban residents (Pryor, 1983:20), bringing a severity of housing deficiency and extreme occupancy density when there was great demand on housing but the majority of Chinese households could not afford living a whole flat but a part of it, cramming into small cubicles (Pryor, 1983:19) and wealthy class was keen to made profit by subdividing tenement flats. However, the government’s inactive attitude towards public housing development existed, which could be attributed to a high revenue derived from land trade, development and speculation, such as a ‘building boom’ and a wave of land speculation since the days of the early 1920s (Bristow, 1984:42-3), for both the government and private developers. At the days when the government refused to make any commitment on housing provision as public expenditure, yet heavily relied on real estate development in Kowloon and Hong Kong Island by private enterprises regardless of the risk of market fluctuation, and of the persistence of housing shortage and residential density that could never be resolved.

With such attitude, the government could merely deal with building density by immature legal regulations intending to reduce building volume through the upper limits of physical dimensions and improving the standard of interior setting for the population (but not in terms of occupancy density), and meanwhile they assisted private developers to build more with increased land supply and financial assistance. In other words, social changes did not result in its radical transformation but instead simple modifications to adapt them. As a result
residential density remained insurmountable under existing legal structure and the government’s decision making praising economic efficiency when there was rocketing housing demand to impel real estate development. They also held that Chinese people could stand for extreme residential density regardless of technological constraint on building design, and that thinning out population over a larger area by property development was plausible. It was against this background that the Buildings Ordinance 1935, separated from Public Health Ordinance, was introduced, with very limited effect on urban development, let alone alleviating overall urban density (Pryor, 1983:20-2; Housing Commission, 1935:267).

At this stage it can be further argued that conceived spaces are selective and rigid in producing and manifesting social reality, as well as susceptible to be obsolete and failed to coordinate with social changes and needs but still being in effect over space, and lasting for long. Furthermore, serving in complying with capitalist production processes renders them impossible a complete elimination of urban density at that time, but one should only come up with a desirable combination with a weighting of different physical forms of density, whereby one should accommodate with another.

4.2.2.3 Post-war era

The end of the Japanese invasion in 1945 was followed by an overwhelming immigration flow, both the wealthy class and in majority the badly-off hardly able to afford even a cubicle (and also later a baby boom in the 1960s) while housing stock never met the huge demand. Worse still, there had been a deterioration of living environment through widespread squatter settlements along the fringe of the main urban areas of Hong Kong Island and (both old and new) Kowloon, street sleepers, informal dwelling space like rooftop constructions that amenities and facilities were far from self-contained, and subdivided flats, cubicles with extremely low spatial standard, even if stipulation on interior space provision had existed for a long time, which were at the time to a large extent still out of the government’s strict enforcement (Fung, 2001:56-7; Bristow, 1984:73). The government confronted again with similar social issues, with an even larger scale this time.

There were, however, still persistent and heavy reliance on private property
(re)development and conservative attitude towards the utility of public funds and bearing public borrowing for financing costly public housing and ancillary infrastructure development as a kind of social welfare and economic intervention to fully resolve housing problems (Bristow, 1984). As far as the twofold virtually unchecked development trends of physical density—population (regional and residential) and building—were concerned, the government still preferred dealing with the latter, as revealed from their measures of relieving density check for encouraging real estate (re)development through revised Buildings Ordinance and official ‘tolerance’ of intensive squatter settlements (Pryor, 1983:23-6). It can be extrapolated that to them the most substantial concern was not to manipulate or reduce the population size and congestion but to achieve socio-economic stability as long as residents did not widely find overcrowding dwellings unbearable. The questions of where and how to build would outweigh inhabitants’ true socio-economic demands, even though public (resettlement) housing development were finally implemented since 1953 by the Hong Kong Housing Authority (HKHA), adopting their own spatial standards of building and flat allocation, by which their first generation constructions were substandard in many respects, more as a means of releasing building lands occupied by squatter settlements.

Under such context and with a coming of enhanced building technology, there were several amendments of the Buildings Ordinance, implying also an expansion on urban intensity in all dimensions. Such intention can be clearly revealed from a memorandum of the Director of Public Works in 1953, regarding the orientation of reviewing Buildings Ordinance 1935, stating that ‘the rate of building must be increased’; ‘increased heights must be permitted in view of the scarcity of building land’; but ‘lower standards of accommodation may be necessary’ (ibid. p.73).

The realization finally came in 1956 with a renewed Buildings Ordinance of 1955 and its subsidiary legislation, the Building (Planning) Regulations of 1956 (B(P)R), both being in force, with more amendments thereafter, until recently. The Ordinance still regulated construction in light of volume, allowing even higher rates than before. As a result it caused a building boom in an unprecedented scale between the mid-1950s and the 1960s, greatly shaping the urban space of what we can see nowadays, especially the inner city areas like SSP where post-war building features remained visible and widespread, though the ignorance of
personal space standard and flat subdivision were still common that a mitigation of occupancy density in private housings did not exist until public housing provision expanded in the late 1960s (Fung, 2001:57).

The Buildings Ordinance of 1955 gave private developers very loose restrictions on spatial dimensions of construction so that less concern was put on the overall effects on urban environment and planning, by which relatively high rise, high density architectures mushroomed throughout the surface of this city, leaving great pressure on transports, disproportional provisions of social services and amenities to population, surging land price, and persistently high occupancy density. It was soon, in the early 1960s, found that simply relieving upper limits of building volume in a manner of universal application had spawned a planning deficiency, consequentially inducing an introduction of the most influential element in formulating Hong Kong future urban development: a formal plot ratio control in sliding scale, rather than solely single fixed-value volume check, by the Building (Planning) Amendment (No.2) Regulations 1962 (effective since 1966 after a four-year grace period) through an additional sliding scale plot ratio schedule for domestic and commercial construction respectively in buildings Ordinance.

The situation as well led to further formalized control, recommended by the Land Development Planning Committee (LDPC) (Pryor, 1983:30; Bristow, 1984:77,91), through a renewed non-legal binding, administrative three-tier residential density zoning, approved by the Executive Council in 1966 and later incorporated and amended in the Hong Kong Planning Standards and Guidelines (HKPSG) in 1979.

Since then the ‘control’ of density has no longer targeted on only restraining it by setting up undifferentiated upper limits, but acted also as a tool to be utilized to achieve economic efficiency at a rationalized degree by which developers could exhaust the potential of building lands with various site areas corresponding to designated level of spatial standard. The plot ratio schedule and density zoning, unlike their preceding counterparts, incorporated implicitly with a consideration of future socio-technological innovations, allowing flexible management and accommodating possible enhancement of building bulk (in terms of site coverage, height [in storey], and GRF), and ‘for use as a guide in different part of Colony to permit more extensive development compatible with maintaining amenity
standards’ (Bristow, 1984:79). They have been enforced or supported by land lease conditions, statutory Outline Zoning Plans (OZP) and non-statutory Special Control Area (SCA), in which permitted plot ratios for each new empty building lot or the redevelopment of existing constructions are stipulated or specified. In other words, all official density controls have got fewer, if not immune from, conflicts with economic processes and interests, serving as a collaborative mechanism: they have successfully complied with, rather than purely impeded, the dominant operation of land development through the effort of private developers competing in modern land market and aiming to exhaust the development potential of land.

The clues of such pro-development ideology in relation to density can also be discovered from memorandums for the Executive Council in 1964 and 1965 and a report on density zoning prepared by the LDPC in 1963, with which the Council agreed and in turn urged to implement the recommendations (Colonial Secretariat, 1964; 1965; LDPC, 1963; HKRS156-1-9025). In weighing the pros and cons of density zoning, the committee suggested zoning had positive sides that it

‘…provides the framework within which development may invest capital in the knowledge that their scheme will not be frustrated by conflicting development nearby’;

‘establishes and maintains the character of the district concerned and so prevents the loss or depreciation of the large capital sums invested on a long-term basis in its development’;

‘enables economy to be exercised in the design and constructions of public services’; and

‘ensures that areas of particular scenic and amenity value to the community at large are protected against the activities of short-sighted individual developers.’ (ibid. p.3)

The major conclusion was still ‘the advantages of zoning outweigh the disadvantages’. Such governmental discourse reveals a strong assumption to relate the control of physical density simply with the benefit of land economy and to equate the former to merely development density. Such rational consideration of density zoning enhanced the manoeuvrability of residential density: they no longer targeted at eliminating urban density as its ‘impossibility’ has already been deeply ingrained, but explicitly attempted to adjust it in order to have the optimal development in responding to socio-economic demands, with negative
externalities as few as possible. They upheld the financial and economic viability of (re)development and the values of lands and properties by, for example, preserving particular scenic view so as to keep the value of spectacle high for maintaining property price, and meanwhile not compromising environmental settings that would do otherwise. Density is therefore both an opportunity for interest maximization and a risk to devaluation which should be sophisticatedly balanced out by better material arrangement, physically and visually. Having several tens of statutory plans prepared in assisting its embodiment since the 1970s, a density control mechanism has been completed.

4.2.2.4 From the late twentieth century to recent days

When urban undeveloped land had been claimed to be exhausted and reclamation no longer possible in creating additional building land for core study area, in the 1990s urban development shifted its focus again on urban renewal. The spatial representations were still subject to transition, in responding and adopting to any conceptual ‘innovation’ and continuous transformation of socio-environmental context, such as the relocation of the Kai Tai Airport, implying a possible lift of development intensity in Kowloon for urban renewal in inner city areas and its consequential negative impacts on the capacity of infrastructures that might necessitate a tighter control by plot ratio.

In relation to recent development of Kowloon and New Kowloon there are two influential studies, The Kowloon Density Study (KDS) conducted in 1991 to 1993 as well as The Stage II Study on Review of Metroplan and The Related Kowloon Density Study Review (KDS Review) undertaken from 1999 to 2003. The turn of the twenty-first century witnessed that the concept and control of density were officially placed on a relatively wider planning context and procedure and were more comprehensively reviewed and technically operated, though there was no breakthrough over the conceptual framework of physical density and the ideology of development.

The KDS Review concluded that plot ratio relaxation was ‘premature’ and the recommendations of KDS on the plot ratio levels of Kowloon, which have hitherto been in force through OZPs’ stipulation, should be remained unaltered. Two influential suggestions were that for both Residential (Group A) (i.e. R(A), for high density residential development) and Commercial zones in Kowloon,
‘[p]ermissible plot ratios…should be significantly lower than those currently permitted under the First Schedule of the B(P)R’, and ‘a single maximum plot ratio should apply to all areas covered by a major land use zoning [the so-called ‘blanket’ control]’ (Planning Department, 2003c, Chapter 10,15, emphasis added). Examining those decisions, the KDS review basically confirmed the validity of the KDS by applying a computerized model (‘DEVIN Model’) to simulate possible result of different scenarios of plot ratio relief, and in turn concluding that no evidence supported such act.

Such decisions were not only derived from a practical and technical concern over and the calculations of actual infrastructural bearing capacity and the benefits from attracting more comprehensive redevelopment by acquiring and integrating several land lots to form a bigger site, but also a conceding of their limitation on such quantitative operation in interpreting density. The KDS (ibid. Chapter 10) admitted that given the existence of open systems such as transports network, and the crudely simplified assumptions for the projection model, a justification for further flexible, finer category and distinction of plot ratio limit at local level or within the same land use zone was impossible for the reason that the urban open system and model carried too many particularities, complexities and uncertainties out of the handling capacity of the model. The dynamic dimension of density, represented as only daily traffic operations in the KDS review, were largely reduced to a single aggregate value, instead of diverse spatial qualities and practices of everyday life.

All in all, it is a demonstration of how density in Hong Kong has long been narrowly and consistently linked to a partiality of conceived spaces as institutional planning and capitalist knowledge: homogeneous impositions of idealized objectivity and certainty upon and a fragmentation of a world full of uncertainties, diversities and heterogeneities (spatial practices, lived spaces, subjective values and the ‘irrationalities’ out of institutional abstractions, etc.). Between the two there lies a ‘fault line’ where actual spatial practices, though to some extent being ‘planned’ and homogenized, deviate from or compromise with what is expected by the planning knowledge, reconcile and constrain capitalist interests and material development. The formal density control has also revealed its tendency towards being more technical, sophisticated, and diverse to coordinate with different scales of urban material development, instead of oppressing them.
4.2.3 Statutory and Administrative Control of Density in Sham Shui Po and Implications

Following such historical trajectory and context of evolvement, there are recently four major types of formal density control effective to core study area, corresponding to different geographical levels of physical density: development and population density at territorial, district, and local (e.g. street block, building) level; building density at district and local level, and occupancy density at individual level.

Buildings Ordinance and Building (Planning) Regulations concern with the principles and parameters of the physical formation of construction, whether domestic or non-domestic; privately or, with some exceptions, publicly developed, including both external and internal features of a building. For public rental housing around core study area developed since 1981 HKHA has as usual employed its own uniform architectural designs at different decades (Lim & Nutt, 2003) and allocation standards of dwelling space. These two sets of representation influence relatively small scale of space (building, interior space, individual) and bring immediate, direct effects on the physical fabric of their targeted spaces and users. They are as well the realm of spatial practices of everyday life and prone to more resistance and exceptional practices than are those with larger scale for universal application, i.e. OZPs, density zoning, and the HKPSG.

The OZP determines the land use of each subdivided block through categories, its permitted plot ratio under the Buildings Ordinance, GFA, utility, and specific planning requirements, such as maximum building height, and decisions made in KDS and KDS review, while the HKPSG incorporates density zoning of residential constructions in which each zone is subject to sliding scale plot ratio, site coverage and building height control, by means of either building regulations or land lease and OZPs. Representing a uniformly applied conceived space at regional and district level, they have to rely on local level controls for actual operation.

To concretizing these conceived space, land lease as an administrative tool is applied to specify the conditions of a land lot stipulated through these statutory regulations or non-statutory planning guidelines and special controls, including also building restrictions; rate and range clauses; design, disposition and height clauses (Chan, 1993).
4.2.3.1 Buildings Ordinance, Building (Planning) Regulations and amendments

The Public Health and Buildings Ordinance of 1903 stated that for domestic building built on land leased after 1903 the height should not exceed the width of its adjacent street and maximum depth should not be longer than 40 feet (around 12.2 m), by which domestic building were of mainly 3 to 4 storeys, and relaxation was granted if windows were installed for ventilation and natural lighting, while for those leased before 1903, the standard was 1.5 times the street width. 4 storeys within 76 feet (23.2 m) was the maximum height (PHBO, 1903:1542; Pryor, 1983:18-9). As for the internal space provision, it defined ‘overcrowding’ as a domestic space less than 50 sq. ft. (4.65 m²) and 550 ft³ (15.56 m³) per adult, and non-subdivided room should at least provide a habitable space of 30 sq. ft. (3.25 m²) and 330 ft³ (9.34 m³) (PHBO, 1903:1494). However, cubicle was legally acceptable, on condition that no more than two were subdivided in a room, or only one was allowed if a room had no ‘window at the rear opening either directly or across a veranda or balcony into the external air’, and the cubicle should have a floor area of at least 4 sq. ft. (5.95 m²) (ibid. p.1529, section 154).

Since then more requirements were added through amendments of the Building Ordinance itself. Nevertheless, explicit and independent regulations on room subdivision came relatively late, such as Bedspace Apartments Ordinance of 1994. It was not until 2008 did the government reinforce the supervision of illegal construction work, including substandard subdivided flats, through the Building (Minor Works) Regulations of 2008 for more specific control and enforcement. Despite such strengthened legal regulation, subdivided flats or rooms and rooftop house have already been a commonplace, resulting in many resistant spatial practices against rigid legal constrain throughout the history of Hong Kong.

The Buildings Ordinance of 1935 should be regarded as a failed attempt to tackle occupancy density by restraining merely the overall volume of residential building bulk. While the rules of facility provision were retained, maximum length of a residential building dropped to 35 ft. (10.7 m) in order to reduce poorly lit, ventilated cubicles (Buildings Ordinance, 1935 [1950]:466). As for building height, it was still limited by abutting street width, ranging from 1 to 1.25 times, while no more than three storeys was allowed unless it was constructed by fire resisting materials, but an endorsement of Governor in Council was necessary for exceeding five storeys (ibid. p.492-3). The plot ratio, at the time, was in
average no more than three, and building height was commonly lower than 80 feet. However, the Building (Planning) Regulations from 1956 to 1966 granted a basic plot ratio of 6 and vertical height as much as twice of the street width, resulting in a huge enhancement of building intensity in terms of number of storey, especially for developments with large site coverage (Bristow, 1984:77). Since then in SSP relatively high-rise tenements with five to nine storeys have been prevailing.

4.2.3.2 Space allocation and density standards of public housings by Hong Kong Housing Authority

While there have been no space allocation standards for private residential housings after several amendments of the Buildings Ordinance of 1955, there have been relatively fixed standards in allocating public rental housing unit in accordance with designated occupancy rate per person, changed over time, though units are not freely chosen by dwellers, and the actual allocation could be higher than the minimum standards. Surrounding core study area there are four public rental housing estates, representing different ages and architectural and spatial designs of public housings, which are Lai Kok Estate (built in 1981), Nam Cheong Estate (1989), Lai On Estate (1993) and Fu Cheong Estate (2001). Their (approximate) occupancy density can be found in the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>Pre-1973</td>
<td>‘Group A Estates (i.e. Government Low Cost Housing and Housing Authority estates): The allocation standard was that the Net Living Area (NLA) which is the net living space excluding kitchen, toilet and balcony would not be less than 35 sq. ft. (3.25 m²) per person. Children were counted as adults or, for those under 10 years of age, to be counted as half an adult. Group B Estates: The allocation standard was that the NLA would not be less than 24 sq. ft. (2.23 m²) per person.’ (Liu, Wu, &amp; Lee, 1999:46)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 1973</td>
<td>‘The Housing Authority decided to adopt a uniform system for allocation of all accommodation. An allocation standard should be 3.25 m².’ (ibid.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974/75 to 1981/82 (Lai Kok Estate, 1981)</td>
<td>‘The NLA would steadily increase beyond the standard of 3.25 m² per person and reached an average of 4.43 m² [around 47.7 sq. ft.] per person in 1981/82.’ (ibid.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>‘Following a review on the allocation standards, the Housing Authority decided to relax the standards and to raise the allocation standard to 4.0 m² per person NLA or 5.5 m² [~59.2 sq. ft.] Internal Floor Area (IFA) per person.’ (ibid.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1987  
(Nam Cheong Estate, 1989)  
‘The Housing Authority further relaxed the allocation standard for new lettings to provide each person with no less than 4.2 m² (~45.2 sq. ft.) per person NLA or 5.5 m² per person IFA.’ (ibid.)

1991  
‘Following a review, the Housing Authority approved in September 1991 the dual allocation standard; i.e. all tenants would be given a choice of two allocation standards with two correspondingly different Median Rent-Income Ratio (MRIR) limits. Hence, a tenant could choose between the allocation standard of 5.5 m² per person IFA with rent set at the MRIR limit of 15% or a new standard of 7 m² (~75.3 sq. ft.) per person IFA with MRIR limit at 18.5%.’ (ibid.)

1993  
(Lai On Estate, 1993)  
The actual allocation was in average at 8.7 m² (~93.6 sq. ft.) per person, while official allocation standards were unaltered. (Yip et. al., 2009:746)

1998  
(Fu Cheong Estate, 2001)  
The actual allocation was in average at 9.8 m² (~105.5 sq. ft.) per person, while official standards were unaltered. (ibid.)

2003  
The actual allocation was in average at 11.3 m² (~121.6 sq. ft.) per person, while official allocation standards were unaltered. (ibid.)

2008  
In average 12.4 m² (~133.5 sq. ft.) per person (HKHA, 2013:6)

2013  
In average 13 m² (~140 sq. ft.) per person (ibid.)

Table 4.1  
The evolving standards of living space allocation and occupancy density by Hong Kong Housing Authority (1953 – 2013)  
(Sources: Liu et al., 1999:46; Yip et. al., 2009:746; HKHA, 2013:6)

With enhanced vertical architectural development and relatively ameliorated space standards, unlike their preceding generation such as old Shek Kip Mei Estate, public housings incorporate alternative and additional spatial representations of planning, gradually focusing on well-rounded, balanced land use allocation, and improved open space provision at the expense of site coverage of the buildings, rendering totally disparate space, both socially and physically, compared to inner city area. There have also been more residential units than tenements owing to high-rise architectural design. The occupancy density and rate in public housing are, due to such strict standardization, more stable and regular than those of private housing, though not rigidly fixed.

4.2.3.3  Density zoning and Hong Kong Planning Standards and Guidelines

The chapter two of HKPSG deals with planning principles for residential density in terms of population and building development. SSP is categorized as Metro area (New Kowloon) with four development principles:
‘(a) within acceptable environmental limits, to maximise the intensity of people and jobs close to high capacity transport systems (particularly rail);

(b) conversely, to limit densities in areas not well served by high capacity transport systems;

(c) wherever possible, to reduce densities in highly congested districts which are experiencing widespread environmental and operational problem; and

(d) to limit densities in areas where the visual impact of development will be the prime concern.’ (Planning Department, 2003b:5-6)

The Metro area is subdivided into three density zones, in which SSP has been subordinated to Residential Zone 1 (R1, see figure 4.1) since this administrative policy was drafted, specifying that it should have ‘the highest density of residential development’ which is ‘well served by high capacity public transport systems such as rail station or other major transport interchange’ (ibid.). In the case of SSP where transports networks have been well-developed, development with maximum intensity can be expected inevitably to be a norm. Unlike zone 2 and 3 depending only on land lease and OZP for enforcement of further reduction of plot ratio through sliding scale control stipulated in HKPSG, zone 1 utilizes full control from the schedule 1 of B(P)R and later the regulations of KDS review.
4.2.3.4 *Plot ratio control and Outline Zoning Plans*

The plot ratio schedule for domestic and non-domestic buildings from the B(P)R Amendment (No.2) Regulations of 1962 is shown in table 4.2. Plot ratio in Hong Kong is defined as ‘the ratio between the gross floor area (GFA as defined under B(P)R) of a building and the area of the site on which it is erected (the Net Site Area)’ (see figure 4.2) (Planning Department, 2003b:4). In the period from 1966 to 1993, plot ratio for domestic building could be as high as 8 to 10 depending on the class of site and for non-domestic construction 15, if irrespective of any additional height restriction on Kowloon.

Under the Town Planning Ordinance the Town Planning Board (TPB) have prepared the OZPs in which the core study area of SSP is now subordinated into Kowloon Planning Area No.5, Cheung Sha Wan Plan (S/K5), firstly gazetted in 1971 (TPB, 2014). The inner city residential area was once incorporated in Kowloon Planning Area No.3, Tai Kok Tsui (LK/3), gazetted in 1973, until 1998 (TPB, 2013b). This area has stable situation in land use zoning and rezoning was less occurred in this area, as the land use nature of this area has been hardly altered as a large portion of land has already been covered by domestic buildings (categorized as R(A)) until recently, since the OZPs were first drafted in the 1970s. The configuration of zones is depicted on maps as shown in figure 4.3 and 4.4.

As depicted in next chapter (figure 5.8), the existing residential building blocks in inner city region within core study area were mostly erected around the period from the 1950s to the mid-1980s but few had been fully benefited from or were directly affected by any amendment of the OZPs, such as a relief of tallness of constructions due to the relocation of Kai Tak Airport in 10 July 1998 and a building volume control through stepped height bands, building gaps and air path etc., in concern of visual and environment issues, added in S/K5 plan in 2010, though still higher than before.
### Table 4.2 Percentage site coverage and plot ratio in Building (Planning) Regulations
(Source: B(P)R, Chapter 123F, section 18a; First schedule)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Height of building in metres</th>
<th>Domestic buildings</th>
<th>Non-domestic buildings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Percentage site coverage</td>
<td>Plot ratio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Class A site</td>
<td>Class B site</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not exceeding 15 m</td>
<td>66.6</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 15 m but not exceeding 18 m</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 18 m but not exceeding 21 m</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 21 m but not exceeding 24 m</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 24 m but not exceeding 27 m</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 27 m but not exceeding 30 m</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 30 m but not exceeding 36 m</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>47.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 36 m but not exceeding 43 m</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 43 m but not exceeding 49 m</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 49 m but not exceeding 55 m</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 55 m but not exceeding 61 m</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 61 m</td>
<td>33.33</td>
<td>37.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Class A site**: 'a site, not being a class B site or class C site, that abuts on one specified street not less than 4.5 m wide or on more than one such street'

**Class B site**: 'a corner site that abuts on 2 specified streets neither of which is less than 4.5 m wide’

**Class C site**: ‘a corner site that abuts on 3 specified streets none of which is less than 4.5 m wide’
For the rest of the core study area and its adjacent region, rezoning, through amendment proposed by the TPB and approved by the Executive Council, only
occurred in reclamation land (formerly zoned as G/IC with ferry pier, bus terminus and unbuilt land) and military land and later refugee camp (former Sham Shui Po Barracks, as ‘other specific use, OU’), in where a large portion of land was by turns changed into R(A) for public estates development launched in 1976, 1986, 1989 (i.e. before repealing of the airport height control) and 1999, as well as Home Ownership Scheme housing built in 1989, open space (‘O’, such as parks), and commercial use (‘C’). Thus, the latest regulations, as substantial indicators determining future development of physical space, listed in the schedule of use in explanatory notes attached to OZPs should be examined.

The OZPs specify maximum building height, plot ratio, GFA, permitted uses of space, and special controls of each land use zone. Except the Comprehensive Development Areas (CDAs) as current construction sites for urban renewal projects, which will be basically resumed to be a residential use upon completion in the case of SSP, core study area includes six types of zone: R(A)6 and R(A)7, C(2), G/IC, and O. Residential zone is the most substantial one in core study area given that, not only in terms of its dominant quantity, in the future more housing redevelopment are expected to be conducted and the consequential space will be subject to the latest rules of residential development stipulated in the OZPs.

Residential (Group A) zone is planned for private and public ‘high density residential developments. Commercial uses…are always permitted on the lowest three floors of a building or in the purpose-designed non-residential portion of an existing building.’ (TPB, 2014:9)

Subject to KDS review, ‘R(A)6’ and ‘R(A)7’ have a maximum plot ratio of 7.5 for domestic building and 1.5 for non-domestic portion of the same construction, i.e. an overall plot ratio of 9 is allowed for such composite buildings, if site coverage is 400m² or larger. Otherwise only 6 is allowed. Within this range, the distribution of plot ratio between domestic and non-domestic use or among different constructions at the same site or development scheme can be adjusted with a certain degree of flexibility. New constructions are constrained by basic height restrictions of 80mPD and 90mPD respectively, but 20m more can be added with the abovementioned land area requirement. Minor relaxation can also be granted upon planning permission for flexibility, if complying with certain criteria and fulfilling planning and administrative requirements.
Figure 4.4  Outline Zoning Plan showing core study area (Kowloon Planning Area No.5, Cheung Sha Wan, S/K5/33, 2011-11-8)  
(Source: Town Planning Board)
4.3 Implicit Density Controls

The variations of physicality and materiality in terms of static urban architectural fabrics are without doubt an integral building block of density, but this is not the end of the story. Density is not only unevenly distributed geographical-material conditions with differentiation due to temporal variations of technological and representational transformation, but also a realm of diverse individuals’ spatial practices and lived space, incorporating with an even wider spectrum and scale of materiality, from for example the land management of whole territory to a subtle, small-scale use of space within a floor of a building or a corner on street acting as a medium of their dynamic everyday life. Those processes render density a more complicated nexus: it is centred on human being, varying through time and space filled with meanings expressed in their actions, yet out of the capacity of direct density controls due to uncertainties generated through relatively subtle spatial practices. Furthermore, independent institution utilizing formal density control at its disposal for particular purpose like URA, though their aims are not directly related to the control of density itself, has significant influences on the actual (re)manifestation of urban density by producing new physical space. Thus, they should also be regarded as an implicit density control. The representations of spaces should thus be investigated in a boarder aspect, and considered as part of the totality of urban density in which dynamic and static forms of density meet and interact, though it can be argued that both formal and implicit density control similarly shared an absolute space approach.

4.3.1 Land Development Control and Process

One of the prerequisites for the urban development under intentional density control rests on the land, as politically defined geographical foundation, which has to be concerned prior to the imposition of any spatial representation of density. SSP has witnessed its intensification of spatial abstractions on its natural land, including new legal-technical regulations, such as layout plan and reclamation schemes, on space distribution, demarcation, and ownership or rights to access to land; intricate economic processes determining the government’s or private agencies’ motivation, incentives for and preferences on land (re)development; the transition and confinement of urban boundary and spatial reach for the imposition
of spatial abstractions. Land thus further acquires its symbolic meanings related and corresponding to every group of people, which however are not perpetual yet subject to alterations over time. These aspects will be fully elucidated in the next two chapters.

4.3.2 Institutionalized Urban Redevelopment Mechanism

If the conceived spaces of urban density are largely related to land and building development, spatial reproduction and land refilling, then there must be additional representations as a medium coordinating and enhancing operation efficiency between the economic-legal processes and density controls, in form of, for instance, land redevelopment mechanism. Property redevelopment in SSP once occurred as a simple replacement of construction conducted by private developers. Urban Renewal Authority (URA), under the Urban Renewal Authority Ordinance (URAO, Chapter 563) established in 2000 in replacing Land Development Corporation, found in 1987, has been vested with greater financial and legal power so as to enforce certain stipulations if necessary, such as the Lands Resumption Ordinance (Chapter 124) and Land (Compulsory Sale For Redevelopment) Ordinance (Chapter 545), as well as any law related to the processes of land resumption, planning, and building regulations of maximum permitted spatial parameters.

As a self-financed (occasionally backed by public fund) and quasi-government organization operating in fashion of a private corporation, its operation inevitably aims at capital maximization ensuring its continuity through the most financially productive development: composite, mixed-use residential-commercial, joint-ventured private property project, cooperating with private developers or the Hong Kong Housing Society (HKHS). Surmounting the limitations of redevelopment conducted by small private developers, URA dominates the future manifestation of SSP’s physical space. Under the auspice of public funds and with alleviated, if not without, pressure on considering time cost and profit rate, it has greater affordability on the risk of conducting time-consuming projects, and as a result, unlike its precedents, the scale of urban renewal expands from one or several land lots to full street blocks, forming a construction site several times larger than before. In other words, subject to plot ratio system while being able to produce construction with physical dimensions as
close to maximum upper limit as possible, unprecedented giants of residential-commercial building will be, and have been produced by these projects.

4.3.3 Spatial Practice Controls

Besides static physical space, at the local and individual levels, density can also be manifested through the process of spatial practices, in form of everyday life taking place in one’s subsidiary physical setting, where conceived space and lived spaces interact, contradict with, restrain or influence each other. This process involves the active, purposeful concentration and distribution of people in dynamic, over particular space with specific time periods and durations, and also the subtle behaviour of modifying or utilizing physically limited yet legally regulated usable space for any purpose, altering original significance of the space, and resulting in new manifestation of urban density.

Conceived spaces, still mainly in legal forms as a guarantee of universality, penetrate into these spatial practices in attempting to intervene their features in the name of, for example, social order, hygienic concern, public safety and so on, so that the consequential densities are impeded and manoeuvred to a degree capable

**Figure 4.5** Map showing the plan of pedestrian scheme implemented in SSP  
(Source: Transport Department, 2014a)
to be graspable by the urban administrators, one of the origins of the spatial representations.

Under these senses, there are at least three aspects. The first one is street management involving official hawker control implemented since the 1920s by a license system and a pedestrian scheme in the early 2000s. Being unsuccessful to deal with a rising severity of street nuisances, a tremendous reform occurred in the 1970s to halt the issue of new license in order to reduce their absolute number and to stringently restrict their scope of activities and spatio-temporal distribution to several tens of designated streets including those in SSP, from densely and unruly occupied space to orderly and tidily located one (Sujanani, 1984). There are also several stipulations, such as *Public Health and Municipal Services Ordinance* and *Food Business Regulation*, against any serious obstruction and nuisance of the streets by commercial activities or extending working premises to public space, though violation is not uncommon, as long as it does not create excessive disruption. This reflects a competitive nature of spatial encroachment.

In addition, considering an inadequate capacity of road space for both vehicles and pedestrians at certain hectic streets which are major commercial centre of SSP, such as Apliu Street where pedestrian volume can at peak hour exceed 5,500 people per hour, the Transport Department since 2001 launched a scheme of pedestrianization of in order to reduce traffic flow and to improve pedestrians’ mobility by limiting entry of vehicles at specific time periods (Transport Department, 2014a). In adjusting the quantity of pedestrian flow, the government intends to facilitate the economic logic of a street by enhancing the flow of pedestrians and consumption, emphasizing merely on the commercial aspect of street space and largely reducing street life to, with few exceptional cases, a primarily consumption-led spatial practices, and on the other realize an idealized space with strengthened temporal order and tidy appearance.

The second one is the policies of tolerance, clearance and rehousing of squatters and street sleepers. During the early decades of post-war period when housing was in scanty and demographic pressure grew unchecked, squatter settlements located along then urban fringe were getting more prevailing around the core study area, such as Shek Kip Mei and Lei Cheng Uk, and meanwhile tremendous number of household, unable to afford prohibitive rent for private housing or suffering from conflagration of squatter settlement, chose to squat on
the streets of SSP, resulting in a densely populated streetscape and vast amount of temporary housing intensively sprawling over a large piece of (crown) land yet with complete social and community function (Smart and Tang, 2014:238-9). The overwhelming growth of spatial practices and their consequential physical spaces, acting as a resistance of the imbalanced and contradictory relation between imposed land economy and actual urban reality and social needs, finally invoked the government’s political actions of a two-way policy in bringing renewed man-land (physical and legal) relations that on one hand squatter housings and crude structures of street sleepers, with certain requirements and restrains (e.g. locations of licensed area, building volume, material, amount, etc.), gained temporarily legitimized status, and public resettlement and housing scheme was put forward to gradually absorb the squatters and the lands occupied by them, on the other hand (Bristow, 1984:94,97).

The final one was a largely failed control at least in SSP due to widespread violation plus long-standing loose enforcement, that is, regulation on various illegal construction works as another kind of spatial resistance, especially houses on privately owned rooftop of tenement as alternative but unrecognized housing which, varying in size, extended the dwelling space out of finite building space, and meanwhile increased the overall building bulk and material density. In reality the effort on the control of occupancy density and illegal constructions in private housing was largely in vain and less effective than building volume control, due partially to a long lasting, overwhelming needs on producing and consuming living space, especially for SSP as a typical long-established private residential area filled with tenements. Although since 1st of June, 1982 a new policy strictly forbidding any new illegal construction activity of rooftop house and squatter housing was implemented, associated with a rehousing scheme, such act did not influence their ubiquity, at least in SSP (HKHA, 2003). Its enduring existence is a risk for its dwellers when the inactive, stagnant conceived space, tolerating such structures without enforcement, finally ‘rejuvenates’ to eradicate them in favour of, for example, urban redevelopment processes.

It can finally suggest that every new process in producing spatially disciplined individuals with altered living space and practices has intermingled with the original socio-spatial processes, complicating all elements of space and their internal relations. When it comes to the conceived space, the development of
high density urban space is an incessant process of the transition of socio-spatialities. In assisting with economic powers, they are being shaped and reshaped, are displaced and reconfigured; created and refined; and/or stabilized or subverted.

4.4 Implications on the Processes of High Density Development and Spaces

Based on the above discussion on the nature of spatial representations, there are five highly related implications on the production processes of high density urban spaces of SSP, both in terms of static physical setting and dynamic collective practices, orienting the analysis in chapter 5 and 6.

4.4.1 Immediate Consequences:

Physically and Functionally Fragmented Social Space

SSP has firstly been heavily transformed from natural state to rigidly demarcated spaces, hugely populated on mainly reclaimed and fully developed land. Both vertically and horizontally, with increasingly complicated types of control, the conceived spaces have gradually resulted in massive, physically and functionally fragmented and one-dimensional spaces: space is no longer freely encroached for spatial practices whatever a person wants and the utility of a space is no longer collectively determined but monopolized to be mechanically produced and distributed. This is particularly crucial in the case of SSP since it is dominated by and designated as residential-commercial area, implying that space is more prone to be subdivided as small and many as possible for maximum interest, despite the increased massiveness of such urban fabric. It is also a tidy and strictly regulated, predetermined use of space. The dissipation of collective, large-scale spatial encroachment is followed by singularized spaces in terms of spatial practices: everyday life is obviously spatially programmed and the space of SSP acquires a feature of functionally clear-cut division and separation without transgression: residential or commercial; leisure or working, etc.

Housing development is then a norm in SSP—with merely variations of its architectural form. Density control has generated apparent transformation of SSP’s urban contour, as high rise, intensive architectural forms have been permitted to replace the old one through redevelopment in order to achieve more economically efficient use of land. The height of newly redeveloped buildings
approximately double or even triple that of the preceding construction on the same site, especially tenement, by exhausting possible plot ratio standard.

More substantially, it then gives rise of opportunity for redevelopment to produce more non-tenement composite buildings since the 1970s. As a large redevelopment site can be granted maximum plot ratio through OZPs, plot ratio has now much to do with redevelopment mechanism, compelled by URA and real estate corporations, as the mediums for SSP’s recent major physical transformation, on condition they are financially capable for land acquisition until a site is sufficiently large to exploit the conceived space. At the same time, however, tenements with tremendous amount of subdivided flats are allowed to last still for a long time, though each of the redevelopment will of course eliminate this kind of housing and will render the original spaces prohibitive for certain groups of residents, especially for those who rely on substandard housings.

In addition, primarily targeting at mechanical reconfigurations of physical space, these alterations must also be related to intricate and subtle spatial behaviours as everyday life under temporal variations, including movement, circulation, purposeful concentration, the flux of street vitality in terms of the nature of their local economic-social activities, the frequency and duration of social interaction in such space, the ways of distancing or encountering high density space between residential and exterior space, and emotional responses to crowded, socially overcharged environment, etc. Urban density involves qualitative and quantitative modification of the physical space, but individuals’ spatial practices and lived space are relationally linked to it. In the case of SSP nowadays, these kinds of spatial practices, through implicit density controls, are still predominately separately distributed and transiently occurred, rendering permanent spatial encroachment impracticable. These characteristics are relatively straightforward to discern, and their deeper significances on socio-spatial relations will be discussed in the following sessions.

4.4.2 Stagnancy of Conceived Spaces towards Future Redevelopment, and Dissipated Spatial Resistance

Though the conceived spaces have great impact on physical spaces, the application of them is not a fleeting phenomenon. They are either attached to consequential spaces, or waiting for concretization. In other words, a physical
space is never detached from conceived spaces once it has been produced, while the latter, especially for those of physical parameters, lasts for a certain period of time, as stagnancy, until the advent of renewal and re-imposition, implying no total transformation is to be allowed and enforced in the short-term. Without an imposition on material spaces, the abstractions can still be enhanced to strengthen their control on physical space through future (re)development mechanism, and meanwhile to be more rigid and oppressive on spatial practices. There is therefore always a time lag between a potential relaxation of physical massiveness and the actual content of urban fabric.

In contemporary context, the ‘technical maxima’ of building volume is no longer a major constraint, while legal maxima does: SSP has never exhausted its legally entitled development potential of land related to any subsequent modification of spatial representations regarding building parameters. Plot ratio regulation is not so much a control of the present as an opportunity of capitalist accumulation. OZPs and density zoning do not orient the production of physical space from scratch, but instead to a large extent confront with the future development of density: though theoretically the category of land use zoning can be converted upon permission and historical inertia has an influential role in limiting possible land use, considerations on changes basically revolve around the efficiency and potential of land economy, generating a ‘redevelopment-friendly’ environment, when all physical dimensions of space are permitted to be relieved.

It should be further argued that the stronger and more diverse the conceived spaces are, the weaker the spatial resistance is. In the case of Hong Kong, recently the conceived spaces of density control, whether formal or informal, have been strengthened through increasingly sophisticated, rigid and complicated manipulation over the utility of physical spaces and also through continuously encroaching and producing new physical by concretizing the abstractions, rendering large-scale alternative spatial practices in escaping from residential density, like squatting and illegal construction, gradually unachievable, though these traces can still stretch over a long time-span, such as rooftop houses. The beginning of dissipation can be traced back to the days when public housing began to spread over the urban space and more spatial abstractions of density control, whether formal or implicit, besides buildings ordinance started to take effect to manage urban density in a more rigid manner.
4.4.3 Space as Traps

Space will be redeveloped to reconfigure socio-spatial elements. However, it is not changed frequently especially for built environment. The temporal interval between two physical reproductions would then become a *trap* of many kinds, particularly when a society has been rigid in spatial distribution and alternatives as spatial resistance have been eradicated.

The ‘trap’ has at least three senses in this study: first as a physical trap of corporeality, rendering individuals’ inflexible tie of space in accordance with their social elements. The process of spatial decantation, for instance, which can be a long-wait from one space to another, traps people into socially produced residential spaces. If alternative housing choices such as squatting were not sought or have been fully eliminated, certain groups of people would be deprived of their autonomy and possible choices for freely producing and utilizing space wherever they wanted, and be trapped into an isolated interior space. Living with density, regardless of its degree, would then be a must.

Secondly there is a mental and abstract spatial trap of representations not only fixing the attributes producing physical spaces in the past, but also the values which are afloat subject to redefinition, rendering the space comparable within the same urban fabric and physically distinguishable for matching their potential users, though fixed attributes and material spaces do not actively respond to social transformation and lived spaces immediately and can be standstill endurably to keep on suppressing or maintaining lived spaces until a coming of spatial reproduction process. On the other hand, such trap also relates to the ‘rules’ of using physical spaces which empower certain kinds of spatial practices yet confine others.

A remark should be also provided to explain how such traps manifest themselves physically. Though OZPs and density zoning interfered a space by homogeneous imposition, trapping particular social and physical elements and institutionally produced abstractions into it, the representations of space and their consequential effects are not synchronously produced but full of variations over time. The juxtaposition of physical spaces at the same time-space is therefore a result of a manifestation of multiple possible combinations and layers of conceived spaces at different geographical levels, with the asynchronicity of execution, transformation, and validity. Representations vary in and generate
distinct physical settings, spatial practices, and social meanings, no matter how subtle and insignificant they can be. The tenements in SSP, incorporating with historically unique living environment and streetscape, are examples of such trap and time-lag that their existence is no longer consistent with the surrounding such as CDA with well-planned high rise buildings and modern commercial premises, whilst the representations of space preserve their potential of transition.

The physical and abstract traps then derive the third significance of ‘trap’: when limitations on the utility of external space through for example street management have been enhanced, they could reflexively constrain, if not totally eliminate, flexibility in extending, changing or modifying residential space in order to relieve residential density.

4.4.4 Attachment of Socio-Spatial Elements vs. Spatial Default and Historical Disconnection

While the renewal of physical space, in whatever forms, entails re-imposition of the conceived spaces of spatial parameters, there will be more social (can also be conceived spaces) and spatial elements attached to the very space after its establishment, in which their content hinges on initially the subsidiary social features of the space. They are changed through time, and in turn bring new social groups with varying socio-economic status, determining the right to assess to such space. Spatial practices, lived spaces, and their historical relationality are then embedded. As discussed above, a physical space is prone to be redeveloped to end the stagnancy of conceived spaces. If all conceived spaces, including capitalist force, planning knowledge and legal framework, overwhelmed other socio-spatial elements to dominate the process of redevelopment, these elements would be wiped out totally resulting in spatial default and historical disconnection: a reconfiguration of physical space with no original social and historical traces.

The process of urban renewal involves initially a radical transformation or an elimination of socio-spatialities at the expense of, nevertheless, original lived spaces and sociality attached to the very space. Individuals such as the residents of a building scratch meanings and practice everyday life in a way heavily subject to symbolic representations, while agency like URA reconstructs, adjusts, and perpetuates itself in responding to the challenges against agencies competing for the right to the space, by eliminating contradictory spatial meanings and social
identities produced by the very agency and rebuilding space upon renewed conceived space. Those who have the right to the space are able to dominate density and they totally determine how residential space and the degree of density is socially and unevenly distributed and reproduced.

In terms these social-spatial elements, more specifically, buildings ordinance attaches consequential spaces with qualitative and quantitative features and conditions. In qualitative side it includes interior settings, influencing spatial practices such as distribution, concentration, the ways of coping with limited usable space, and even possibility for modification, sometime against the regulations on interior configuration; the boundaries of space for identifying ownerships; the rights to access, tenure, ownership of space; as well as the social identities like legal eligibility for space and characteristics of its users who impose values on their own spaces, as substantial indicators determining their spatial reach of everyday life. For the quantitative one, there are elements such as the numbers of users, occupancy rate and density, and fluctuating exchange value as a ground of legal right and eligibility to own space, to choose how dense, how large a space one can live or work with. As a result, experience of density is never completely identical. A transition of them due to, for instance, a new social composition of residents and institutional structure results in renewed significance of density, physically or abstractly.

One example is that in pre-war era tenements were once for relatively well-off individuals who could be able to build on their own building land and later in the early post-war decades who could afford the rent for a whole flat or a cubicle prohibitive to a great majority of Hong Kong people. In 1961, according to census data, most domestic household (47.1% or 313,912) in Hong Kong lived in cubicle and room, far outnumbering ‘the whole self-contained flat or tenement floor’, as the second most popular type of accommodation, with only 11.6% or 75,958 households (1971 census, quoted in Pryor, 1983:34). It is only when the tenements has been getting dilapidate and unattractive in property market, people became generally better-off, and there was a surging provision of public housings by, for instance, Ten Year Housing Programme in 1972, that tenements, though relatively less dense than before, tend to become either home of landlords or those who have lost or not been entitled with legal rights to welfares, such as new immigrants. The practice of subdividing flat itself and the *raison d’être* of a
Another example is the allocation of public housing unit. There are also constrains on the access of public housing through stipulated eligibility in terms of personal and economic status. They lead to a juxtaposition of two disparate spaces in and around SSP, i.e. public rental or subsidized and private housing, under the aegis of multiple representations of space producing the contrasts of social identities of inhabitants through categorization and objectivized qualifications to space, assigned by the government or imposed from economic processes. That there are strict conditions to be met for a public housing unit in order to escape from, for instance, substandard residential space, while there are relatively looser but costlier requirements for private housing, clearly separates two groups of individuals apart, particularly in the case of urban underclass: those who are eligible for public housing and those who are not. In addition, such identities as ‘new immigrants’, ‘permanent residents’, ‘landlords’, ‘tenants’, and ‘property owners’, etc., imposed by and meanwhile incorporated into economic processes, help to allocate space in a reductionist manner. This implies also that some groups of people attached with disadvantageous social identities are prone to suffer from spatio-temporal default and disconnection.

4.4.5 Spatial Mismatches

These implications finally reveal mismatches between lived space and conceived space as spatial contradiction. They originate from an impotence of conceived spaces themselves: as partialities reflecting only fragments of the urban totality so that they hold no obligation to concern with the total life of certain groups of individual and to satisfy all social needs. Mismatch is physically revealed as an unbalanced relation between the allocations of space to their inhabitants. It is thus also a direct confrontation between conceived spaces and lived space, manifested by, again, a lost spatial practice of resisting against legal imposition, when space can no longer be freely encroached regardless of legal constrains or one cannot simply retain their own space, and also the allocation of space is not determined by inhabitants but by property rights which however are ultimately dominated by institutional power. Some people are therefore at disadvantage due to, for instance, such consequential spaces of incongruity in
extremely congested form, or owing to the dispossession of space. It should be finally noticed that the degree of influence of all these implications on individuals is also subject to the variations of their own social features and lived spaces.

4.5 Summary

This chapter reveals the multifaceted nature of urban density from the dimension of the representations of space as imperfect reflections on an urban totality. The boundary of the conceived space of density hinges on how density itself is conceptualized: as the physicality of space and all factors subject to more complicated nexus and a wider scale of physicality, social processes and collective everyday life. For the former, the discussion first deals with density as an officially recognized planning knowledge in forms of physical parameters and reductionist nature of man-space relation, concretized through several sets of spatial representations: capitalist processes as well as legal and administrative framework limiting and coordinating those processes. Through a historical review of formal density control and its development trajectory in Hong Kong, the conceived spaces had been transforming in responding to every contextual challenge over the time in order to create reciprocal, or to maintain stable and valid relations among the agencies and institutions, which are related to the production of urban density, from compromise to collaboration, and from simple quantitative control to more sophisticated and technical one, though the underlying epistemological principles of density have not been changed. It also elucidated how capitalist and planning ideology of the urban density is manifested and influenced through the tools of administrative and legal means, such as OZPs, sliding scale plot ratio control, and density zoning. For the implicit controls, incorporating all land policies, urban renewal institutional processes, and spatial behaviour controls, they are equally historically relevant to, or even more influential on the purposeful concentrations of both corporeality and material, for the practices of everyday life with social density. Based on the discussion, this chapter finally elucidates five implications on urban density development processes acting as a basis of argument in chapter 5 and 6: the socio-spatial processes of producing urban density which result in physical and abstract traps, the mismatches between inhabitants and their living spaces, spatial stagnancy, as well as spatio-temporal default and disconnection, etc.
Chapter 5
A History of Density
Physical-Social Transitions and General Spatial Practices of Sham Shui Po

5.1 Introduction

Physical space is one of the fundamental mediums constituting and manifesting ‘density’ as well as its subordinated phenomena, in which mankind as social being moves, gathers and stays at particular places, modifies and concentrates materials or physical settings within a space for manifold driving forces. They are realized by events and phenomena ranged from, for instance, contingently determined geographical and natural advantages or constraints, to any activity for livelihood of certain social groups, to ideological, abstract conceptions of spatial planning controlling the use of space through any representation. They intermingle dialectically, and in turn determine the features of the time-space. To have an overview about how the physical contents within space evolve historically is an important step for understanding the nature of such social space, the reasons why certain socio-spatial processes were or are in effect, and the situations of different social groups experiencing density under disparate or similar processes and spatio-temporalities.

This chapter thus, firstly at regional, district and local level, sheds light on the socio-physical aspect of SSP that acts as a stage on which high density space have been produced through the interactions of spatial trialectics, with a time-span starting from the nineteenth century, i.e. pre-colonial era, to the recent years. To reveal all tangible integrals comprising the material basis of density, the discussion will focus on the historical transitions of several social-physical elements, their features and general spatial practices: land and land use development; housing, architectural features, and spatio-temporal characteristics and variations; economic activities and the material base of such activities, i.e. street-commercial spaces.

There are four aspects to concern with: first, conceived spaces and their implications, as discussed in previous chapter, involving into the processes of producing these spatio-temporalities; second, the ways and aims of producing, using, modifying, or even excluding agencies from physical spaces, which involve
spatial practices that entail different sorts of spatio-temporality, such as residential space and street-commercial activities; third, the process and reason of mutual alteration between conceived spaces and spatial practices in generating new socio-spatial relations; and finally the nature of such transition and further implications on all spatial elements. The discussion will also set up a backdrop for an analysis with case studies on the spatial practices and lived spaces at individual level in next chapter.

5.2 Land and General Land Use Development

Land development represents primarily a horizontal aspect of density. It is not perpetual but always subject to alterations, in response to every person’s complex needs, and in the case of Hong Kong and SSP it has been since the imposition of colonial governance with capitalist processes and representations by which land-human relations were redefined. Before the existence of legal control and further technical planning controls influencing the spatial reach of human activities, land was a contingently developed geographical element on which sparse inhabitants, in spite of environmental constraints, ‘gather’, ‘spread’, and ‘settle’ relatively freely to deal with their everyday life (i.e. rural or primitive settlements), instead of practicing them under artificially, intentionally ‘designed’ ways and being ‘crammed’ into a highly institutionalized and demarcated urban space.

Sham Shui Po has gone through such processes of significant transformation without exception. The grid pattern urban fabric, which is until recently a basic physical setting of SSP consisting of intensely packed, parallel blocks of construction surrounded mainly by neat quadrilateral street networks, did not occur until the British colonial government imposed their legal, political, developmental and planning practices on the land of SSP in the early twentieth century. This session explains how capitalist force, planning mechanism, and related conceived spaces have intervened into the land of SSP as a whole to produce a basis of high density development, transformed from relatively natural condition to highly organized material setting.
Prior to colonial interventions, as Leung (2011) and Smith (1995) pointed out, the area where modern SSP lays was for a long time a rural area occupied by several ‘proprietary villages’ and hamlets. With Cantonese and Hakkanese origin, they were built upon some of the flat land of the members of Kam Tin Tang clan (錦田鄧氏), owning most of the lands in SSP (but not without disputes on the titles of land), who either sold or leased their lands to the villagers from various clans (ibid.), and then paid rent to the imperial Chinese government, complying with customary land practices. With a rural form of everyday life, neither huge demographic pressure nor modern technical planning was imposed on SSP. The physical fabric of the villages accommodated to their surrounding environment and barriers instead of modifying it, let alone large-scale artificial intervention such as reclamation.

‘Sham Shui Po’ was then among the largest village at the hillside of Sai Kok Tsui, along where houses were built south-eastwards. It was approximately located at an area bounded by recent Nam Cheong Street and Hoi Tan Street (Cheng, 2010c:16). This coastal village occupied a strategically and economically substantial place as there laid a deep water pier, around the intersection of Pei Ho Street and Tung Chau Street in recent days (Leung, 2011:10), and a bazaar (墟), with which the village acted as a centre of economic activities (Woo & Hui, 2011). In terms of livelihood, the villagers engaged in cultivation, fishing, poultry, oyster aquaculture, lime production, ship building, and commercial trade, etc. (Leung, 2011:46-7). These activities generated a typical, simple form of traditional
Chinese settlement: with a population of around 2,000 (Smith, 1995), within a limited space surrounded by mountain barrier and separated by intersected lanes where constructions were built along the two sides of them (figure 5.5). With the local commercial activities they created an early form of streetscape in SSP.

The role of ‘land’ in producing density at this historical stage was that its natural surface condition actively determined the point of concentration which was topographically inhabitable, abundant in resources for productions activities, and highly accessible for social and economic interactions. The physical barriers were to a large extent insurmountable due to underdeveloped construction technology, but given a small amount of population and a rural form of everyday life, people had still remained elastic in their spatial reach by extending spatial practices to adjacent land through land trade with its absentee landlord, i.e. the Tang clan, or even squatting, and with fewer complicated administrative and planning controls compared to modern time. Furthermore, land at that time had been subject to legalized management under the Imperial Land Law of the then Chinese government, the Ch’ing Dynasty, and the customary land law, which was complicated yet not as technical and systematic as the modern one, so as to cause chaos related to land ownerships, subletting and tenure, and taxing (Hase, 2006, Chun, 2010). Despite the privatization and fragmentation of lands as registered lots on one hand and physical controls on the other, the consequential horizontal density of materials and population was less a social problem than a voluntary strategy for livelihood.

The year of 1860 is one of the turning points of the fate of SSP, especially for its land development. This is the year that the British extended their edge of colonial rule from Hong Kong Island to Kowloon peninsula with a borderline, cutting across the southern end of the SSP village. During the days between 1860 and 1898 the adjacent ceded land imposed a greater geopolitical significance on SSP. The growth of population as well as land development activities followed. It was the time SSP village became a point where two sets of disparate socio-political apparatus and authority, the Imperial Chinese and the British colonizer, met and were influencing on, if not yet intermingled with, each other.

While the colonial Kowloon was undergoing radical change in its physical structure and swept by a new land development mechanism with British planning practices, indigenous inhabitants and absentee landlords, including the Tang’s
family, were under the Convention of Peking dispossessed of their land
ownerships in Tsim Sha Tsui by the colonial government for erecting military
facilities (Smart & Tang, 2014, 237; Lung, 1997:229; Smith, 1995). Since then
SSP village became a haven for those who could not adapt and lost their
properties from a sudden transformation of social structure. Squatter huts existed
over the lands of SSP whose owner could not be able to prevent these
encroachments since they were living too remote from their holdings (Smith,

Having lost their lands in Tsim Sha Tsui, the Tang clan also gradually gave
up their agricultural lots in Kowloon, selling them to others, complicating the
situation of land ownership in SSP village. The findings of Smith’s (ibid.) archival
research reveal that land ownership and related trade activities in SSP during the
rule of Ch’ing Dynasty were inactive and stable, while after 1860 more frequent
land exchanges, trades, resumptions, and ownership controversies occurred,
triggered by two transitions of sovereignty in year 1860 and 1898. These two sets
of contested spatial representation of ‘land’ and a rising demand on it due to the
spatial proximity of two territories in turn created disparate physical conditions of
SSP at the turn of twentieth century through a redefinition of land by colonial
social and legal system, bringing a new stage of development and an entirely
renewed significance of ‘density’.

5.2.2 Early Colonial Era (1898 - 1945):
The Advent of ‘New Kowloon and Modern Land Practices
5.2.2.1 The evolving significances of land
SSP was not then simply absorbed into the colonial structure but thoroughly
modified in manifold aspects. It bore a spatially substantial place to be exploited
in fulfilling the colonizer’s will of development, especially when there was a
request for land extension in the name of natural barrier for military defence by
British businessmen who might have an underlying aim of land speculation (Lung,
1997:226-8; Sit & Kwong, 2011:33,57). In ninth of Jane 1898 the Convention for
the Extension of Hong Kong Territory was signed for leasing the New Territories,
bounded at south of the Sham Chun River and north of the boundary of old
Kowloon, to the United Kingdom for ninety-nine years. These events imply that
certain portions of newly acquired land would not be simply left unused for
relieving development intensity but fully utilized its developmental potential, especially those with propinquity to the old Kowloon which were institutionally prepared for similar spatial development and planning as the old colony had.

The region south of the Kowloon hills, initially as a part of the New Territories, where SSP also locates, was thus differentiated administratively and institutionally from that to the north. It was soon specially assigned as ‘New Kowloon’ under the ‘New Territories (Extension of Laws) Ordinance, 1900’, by which all laws and ordinances enforced in the original colony were declared to be extended to it. Concurrently the government systematized the mechanism of land management and allocation through rigid juristic intervention into customary land ownership practices, assisted by the Land Court, established also in 1900, which reviewed claims on the titles of land, and in the case of New Kowloon solely issue Crown Lease to successful applicants for the right to use, but not perpetually own their assigned lots, for 75 years plus 24 years upon renewal. All unclaimed land was resumed as Crown Land (Chun, 2010).

Owing to government’s centralization of land ownership by transforming freehold into leasehold, the effect of locational proximity, and the imposition of subtle legal and intuitional control which largely deprived of inhabitants’ autonomy in determining their way of settlement, the meanings of the land of SSP gained a substantial shift in terms of values (both use and exchange), the permitted ways of development, and in turn its consequential material form and manifestation. As a result the SSP village could by no means remain intact. Smart and Tang (2014) suggest that

‘[i]t was thought desirable that those parts adjacent to Old Kowloon should urbanize as quickly as possible. The indigenous residents were treated in very different ways, with New Kowloon villagers getting a much poor deal…The former villages had all been dissipated…displacement and rapid development were assumed necessary and desirable.’ (p.233)

Then, by a two-type land lease system (building land and agricultural land), the government treated the landlord of agricultural land with stringent standards, intentionally preventing and restricting them from individual construction activities in order to preserve the revenues generated from more profitable development, i.e. property development (ibid. p.234-5). The government’s preference of real estate development had therefore emerged, since the costs for converting land use (e.g. heavy payment for premium and planning issues) and
building works were prohibitive while it was solely private developers and corporations which could be capable to finance them (ibid.).

Following the socio-political intervention and transition were the (re)construction of SSP’s physical setting in the light of three aspects, as conceived spaces: SSP layout plan, town development and improvement schemes, and reclamations in accordance with these plans, supported by the operation and decisions of the Land Court over the lots in constraining possible disruption (e.g. land use conversion and construction) that would defy the government’s intention on development. Formal development of SSP followed since 1902. Before that a layout plan was put forward in 1900 for the Land Court’s reference to allocating land lots to respective leaseholders. Village layout and land lot allocation were gradually replaced by neatly outlined blocks, comprising three to four smaller lots and enveloped by an orthogonal street network, as pedestrian open space and later motor vehicle roads, with a stable pattern utilized until recently (e.g. figure 5.3, 5.4). In 1912 after the conflagration of Ap Liu village SSP Improvement Scheme, led by Public Works Department, commenced. More layout plans and reclamation plans were later prepared by which most villages would be (partially) demolished for opening up streets and building lots (Cheng, 2010a:111), and hill barriers such as Sai Kok Shan and low-laying areas were levelled out for flat land. The (proposed) grid network of streets and building lots were mainly for constructing tenements (cf. figure 5.5 and 5.6).

5.2.2.2 Reclamations

Land formation through reclamation has contributed largely to the physical fabric that until recently around one fourth of SSP district is generated from reclamation. When it comes to SSP alone, the proportion will be much higher. Reclamation, however, has hardly been a resolution of physical density. It could only shortly come with declines on quantitative density as the space would finally be consumed and absorbed into the urban fabric, in forms of either tenement or public housing estate in later time, despite increases in absolute number of surface area, unless the land had been occupied for specific use for an extensive period of time. In the case of SSP, reclamations were firstly financed by private developer and contractors and conducted in 1910 (N.K.I.L. 26) and 1911 (N.K.I.L. 27), producing small plots bounded at recent Kwei Lin Street, Tai Nan Street, Lai Chi
Kok Road, and Yee Kuk Street. The acquired lands were mainly granted to developers for housing development, and the government at the time relied on self-financed capital to implement such plans, unless rehousing or exchange of land lots were needed for other influenced leasees, residents or those who could not afford to build house on exchanged inland lot in accordance with legal regulations (Smith, 1995:182, 185-6).

In 1912 to 1914 the government undertook their first stage large-scale reclamation as a part of the Improvement Scheme, bringing a vast piece of land between Nam Cheong Street and Kwei Lin Street where several street networks were formed and SSP was manifested in a rectangular layout bounded south-westwards at coastal Tung Chau Street. The newly reclaimed land served to rehouse displaced villagers whose dwellings were demolished for town development (Leung, 2011:67). The second stage began from 1919 and mainly finished in 1927, by which SSP extended its territory north-westwards from Yen Chow Street to Tonkin Street. Between Tonkin Street and Yen Chow Street there was a large piece of land taken over by the British military, severing as a barrack since 1927 (see figure 5.2) (Woo and Hui, 2011:107-8; Smith, 1995:188, 193).

Figure 5.2 Sham Shui Po and Sham Shui Po Barrack (right) in 1927
(Source: GRS, in Leung, 2011:106)
Figure 5.3  Plan of Sham Shui Po Village Reclamation Scheme (Showing areas already reclaimed and those prepared for reclamation), 17 November, 1911
(Source: GRS, CO-129-384p144 3, original caption)

3 This is a serial number for accessing the information and descriptions of archives from the online catalogue of GRS:
http://www.grs.gov.hk/ws/tc/ps_online_cata_alc.htm#
Figure 5.4  Plan showing exchanges of land during 1917, Sham Shui Po Improvement Scheme, 18-02-1918  
(Source: GRS, CO-129-447p335, original caption with corrections)
Figure 5.5  
(Top)  
Buildings inside an old village of Sham Shui Po  
(Source: GRS, CO-129-450, pp. 381B ff.)

Figure 5.6  
(Middle and bottom)  
Pei Ho Street (middle) with new tenements built after the new town development of Sham Shui Po, c. 1918  
(Source: GRS, CO-129-450, pp. 381B ff.)
5.2.3 Post-war Era (1945 – early 2000s):
Continuous Development on Reclaimed Lands

In the post-war era the reclamation in SSP district resumed, intermittently conducted until 1997. The first stage and second stage Sham Shui Po reclamation surrounding core study area in the post-war period were finished in 1976 and 1981 respectively, which made Tung Chau Street no longer a waterfront. The newly reclaimed land largely remained vacant except for a pier and a bus terminus which was closed down in 1999 (Leung, 2011:68-70, 110). Finally the land was occupied by two public housing estates, i.e. Nam Cheong Estate completed in 1989 and Fu Cheong Estate in 2001, creating a huge physical contrast, in terms of building height, design, and overall layout, with adjacent inner city residential cluster. Such contrast again reveals a socio-spatial differentiation and a stagnancy of asynchronously imposed conceived spaces with multiple technological-legal formulations generating distinct combinations of physical densities and respective space users, though they are juxtaposed within the same time-space.

On the other hand, the Sham Shui Po Barracks, built also on reclaimed land, was finally converted, at different stages, into housing, community and open space since the late 1970s. With withering importance after war, the barrack was shut down in 1977 and a part of its land, on the northwest side bounded on Tokin Street, was redeveloped as a public housing estate, Lai Kok Estate. Sham Shi Po Park as open space, was built in 1983 on another land lot bounded at Lai Chi Kok Road and Tung Chau Street. During the time between 1979 and 1989, the rest of the land of the former barrack had been transformed into a Vietnamese refugee camps, in which closed, isolated, substandard temporary huts housed totally more than five thousand ‘boat people’ and refugees crammed into a small space with triple bunk beds and limited basic facilities (ibid.). After closing down the camps, residential, commercial, and government buildings were in turn constructed: public rental housing, Lai On Estate and HOS housing, Yee Ching Court, both completed in 1993; West Kowloon Centre, the only commercial premises within core study area, in 1994; and Cheung Sha Wan Government Offices in 1997.

The core study area as also an inner city area, surrounded by such contrast spaces, has been finally no longer be expandable through reclamation and therefore the land can be radically transformed merely with its existing architectural spaces yet is confined materially by their predecessors and legally by
gradually enhanced density control, especially OZPs. In the case of SSP, to restrict the significance of its land to simply a medium of real estate development with ordered, mechanically fragmented, and top-down distribution in the earliest day of colonial era, the manifestation of urban density was radically reshaped and since then gradually homogenized until such development has been saturated with no space for expansion. Such process therefore initially contributes to the spatial trap by which possible production process of physical space and spatial practices have been narrowed down in compromising with property development.

5.3 Settlement, Housing and Architectural Development

Land sets up a stage for human settlement development in which the form of density and its physicality is necessarily confined by socio-spatial processes. Lampugnani (1993) made a general statement about density that ‘it is at the origin of every form of human settlement. Villages and cities were established to facilitate both self-protection and trade. Above all, however, they were established in response to the human need to move closer together. The desire to gather has always been the main driving force of settlement. Density is the direct result of the cultural need to communicate immediately and continuously; it is the essence of the urban, and it attains its apotheosis in the metropolis. Thus, broadly speaking, density and the city are one and the same thing.’ (p.9)

He argued for a necessary relation between density, cultural needs, and settlement, but behind the argument there lie further and wider significances and social implications varied from one socio-spatial setting to another. To fully understand the nature of density, thus, one should not stop at the ideas that it is a universal phenomenon of human being tending to have close social relationships with others and that a human settlement must be accompanied with density (in form population concentration), no matter in what spatial forms they are. Transformation—of the ways of, for instance, gathering, settling, concentrating over the land—is also one of the properties of density per se, implying more complicated historical processes of both qualitative (e.g. the socio-spatial features of intensity) and quantitative (e.g. intensification and extensification of population and material through time) alterations in accordance with the conceived spaces previously discussed. This session thus elucidates the historical processes of residential development, of spatial practices derived from such development pattern, and of interferences with spatial resistance. Their consequential spaces
and implications on the urban density of SSP are as well discussed.

### 5.3.1 Real Estate Development

Modern housing construction activities in SSP can be traced back to 1899, prior to the improvement Scheme. Since 1899 private developers, including syndicates and contractors, such as Li Ping and Shamshuipo Land Investment Co. Ltd., considering with its huge development and investment potential, acquired most of the land in SSP village from the Tangs and the Tsangs, at much higher cost than that in the past (Smith, 1995). Land value of New Kowloon tremendously rose following the transition of sovereignty (Smart & Tang, 2014:234). Land exchanges were at the time frequent. In 1909 eight tenement houses were built at a land lot N.K.I.L (New Kowloon Inland Lot) 17 at ‘Nan Chang’ (Nam Cheong) Street, complying with Buildings Ordinances and certain standards of Public Works Department, and being the first private housing development in new SSP (Smith, 1995:181). Tenement construction continued concurrently with reclamations, but was subject to fluctuation of housing demand. The government then in 1918 gave incentives of advantageous terms and low-interest loan to private developers to encourage housing development with satisfactory living conditions intending to alleviate overcrowding and unhygienic dwelling environment (ibid., p.181, 186-7). According to the reports of Public Works Department, 407 houses were built over the new SSP lots from 1909 to 1921 (ibid. p.184).

In the early colonial era of SSP physical density was already experienced in interior living environment due to subdivision of room for working class and certain nodes of concentration related more to the processes of everyday life, such as a market at Pei Ho Streets, expanded in 1928, along which vegetable hawkers gathered and attracted a great deal of residents rendering the street full of passers-by on daytime (Leung, 2011:101). On the other hand the street pattern resulted from housing development provided efficient transport yet at the expense of public open space or leisure space (Cheng, 2010c:17), especially when population surged with the emergence of, for instance, motor vehicles, vendors, and squatter huts in the post-war era. Despite prosperous tenement development, unoccupied land at the fringe of core study area was still available for alternative form of dwelling, mainly squatting, at the time.
In the early post-war era, the originally established land use pattern in SSP, and the institutions of land ownership and planning to a large extent constrained radical transformation of physical space, where the built area had already been covered mostly by tenements constructed at the pre-war era and virtually all of them were replaced by primarily higher-rise tenements with similar architectural design and factory buildings at several streets, during the period between the 1950s and the 1970s and later even taller mixed use podium-tower buildings since the 1970s especially when local secondary production went downhill. Real estate development at the early post-war days was propped by the incentives of new Building Ordinances and amendments, excess demand for housing as population grew incessantly, and the encouragement from the government for rebuilding residential housings, damaged in war, through offering rent concession towards private property developers who found redevelopment on original building lots more economically viable and profitable without spending tremendously on acquiring new land with rising value as property and land market started thriving (Fung, 2001:61).

5.3.2 Squatter Settlements as Fleeting Spatial Resistance

5.3.2.1 Squatter huts

There were, however, disturbances in form of squatter settlements on the spatial order of SSP, at the 1950s when formal building and density control still relied on merely Buildings Ordinance and SSP had already been heavily subject to a rigid economic logic of intentional ‘incapability’ to keep pace with actual social situation, resulted from an overwhelmingly unbalanced spatial distribution for the needs of various spatial practices: working, dwelling, consuming, leisure, etc. The consequence of such disturbances was new social spaces and spatial practices that necessitated a response by transforming itself: apart from rebuilding in situ, the development of public (resettlement) housings around study area through squatter clearance and reclamation were resolutions to the government, whether deliberately or reluctantly accepted as an official housing policy. Strengthened conceived spaces were to be implemented to eradicate such spatial practices.

Before the advent of public (resettlement) housing policy in 1953, squatters challenged or even violated imposed conceived spaces, such as legal control on the right of land ownership, the permitted use of land, and the regulations on
architectural design: adjacent to or within SSP, there was an eruption of squatter settlements over vacant crown land or leased land, whose owners in some cases even permitted to squat or even to build own squatter huts in exchange of financial interest since the beginning of the post-war era (Smart & Tang, 2014:238). The squatter settlements adjoining the core study area was at Shek Kip Mei, built upon a hillside north of SSP. Those structures were unwillingly tolerated by the colonial government, given generally their uncheckable scale, a humanitarian concern and a lack of personnel and mutual support among the governmental departments (D.U.S., 1955, M6, HKRS151-1-4779), as long as the land occupied was not highly potential for development, especially real estate.

One example is a squatter clearance for private housing scheme on a land located at the edge between SSP and Kap Shek Mi (夾石尾, the then Shek Kip Mei), in 1948. Being originally an agricultural land, there was a piece of land bounded at the northeast side of Yiu Tung Street, which was approved to be purchased by The Tat Sing Land Investment Co. intending to erect four-storey tenements with around 200 flats (Director of Public Work, 1948; Fehily, 1950, HKRS156-1-1233). The land, however, had already been occupied by 65 tightly built, illegal two-storey structures for cubicles housing 640 people and running business (shops, foundry and paper factory, etc.) on ground floor (Pearson, 1948; Fehily, 1950, HKRS156-1-1233, see figure 5.7). With long-term consideration on implementing clearance due to the complicated issues of delineating land ownerships, confirming identities and resettling dispossessed squatters, finally the clearance was gazetted and new tenements were erected between 1951 and 1953, serving their residents until recent days. The lands released from squatter settlements surrounding SSP were then gradually eliminated and replaced mainly by both private properties and public housings.
Figure 5.7 The squatter settlement at Yiu Tung Street (top) and map showing its location (bottom, shadowed zone in red)  
(Source: GRS, HKRS156-1-1233)

5.3.2.2 Street sleepers

The architectural and development pattern of SSP also gave rise to a peculiar street life, large-scale street sleeping from the 1950s to the 1960s, as one of the direct responses to the deficiency of proper housing and a defiance against ordered physical space, due to the government’s skewed policy on housing provision, similar to squatting settlement. They were mostly the victims of
conflagrations of squatter huts, one of them being the infamous Shek Kip Mei Fire, a disaster which has been frequently attributed to, at least superficially as an immediate response, the implementation of the initial public housing policy. Street sleepers, as early as 1964, were still not at top priority to be rehoused to resettlement or public housing estates if living in officially ‘tolerated structure’ on condition that no permanent structure could be erected and their size and location were limited (Working Party on Government Policies and Practices with Regard to Squatter Resettlement and Government Low-Cost Housing, 1964:5/6). They made use of the veranda of tenement covering over pavement and turned it into a sheltered space for them to squat (HKRS163-1-1578, quoted in Smart & Tang, 2014:240). Those shelters were built in crude material, by simply hanging on poles any sheet-shape stuff, such as planks, mat, blankets, and tin roof, etc., shielding the squatters from sunlight and rainfall. A police survey in 1954 shows that there were around 21,700 street sleepers and 4,736 temporary shelters in SSP resulted from the Shek Kip Mei fire. More were followed due to other fire accidences occurring later (p.239-41).

Moreover, as Smart and Tang (ibid. p.242) pointed out, the construction of resettlement estates, notably, for instance, the Mark 1 block type of Shek Kip Mei Estate, did not effectively eradicate the problem in a short-term and thus this phenomenon lasted until housing supply, especially public rental housing scheme, was expanded. The immediate consequences of this spatial intrusion were an aggravation of street congestion and a more fierce competition over the street space. Scratching their influences over SSP’s physical fabric, they necessitated renewed representations to reintroduce physical order by the government. Planning for more subsidized housings and a relief of building volume were methods by which such unique ‘hybrid’ residential density on the street combining with commercial activities was permanently removed from public space when most of them were rehoused. Such phenomenon further reveals SSP’s territorial advantage in its history of land development: its relatively close location to the centre of employment. This alternative spatial practice was also a result of another contest and compromise between the conceived—the order of street management and land development mechanism, and the lived—a space for residential convenience and relieving economic burden such as transportation fee and rent, for everyday life and an essential private residential space for safety and shelter.
Nowadays, with relatively ameliorated housing supply policy, street sleepers in SSP, if not totally disappeared, have become a minor group which is largely out of the public view, unlike the past when it was a part of public life. The dissipation of residential alternative in SSP implies that residential density has to be experienced merely as a private affair and in mostly formal constructions.

5.3.3 Vicissitude of Manufacturing Industry and Implications on Housing Development and Residential Density

The economic development of secondary production, particularly manufacturing industries, in SSP had played a role in generating socio-economic agglomerations with respective spatial practices and conceived spaces over streets, commercial premises, and also dwellings, subject to reconfiguration in order to keep pace with the social demands of inhabitants, mainly urban grassroots (e.g. concentrating densely for living close to work places) whose everyday life was rendered spatially and temporally disciplined and scheduled.

Since the 1920s SSP began to evolve gradually into an industrial area with manufacturing ranging from heavy industries like shipbuilding and timber processing, extending from Chueng Sha Wan to Lai Chi Kok, to light industries in relatively large factory buildings for textile, garment, hardware, rattan and enamel manufacturing, as well as small-scaled textile production premises mainly found in core study area (e.g. Mei On textile factory at Yee Kuk Street established in 1932), invested by oversea Chinese who also purchased tenements and business premises for rental use, creating job opportunity for local people. The Second Sino-Japanese War raged in 1937 also brought to Hong Kong new labour force, capital, skills and technologies from the Mainland, benefiting and stimulating the newly emerging and growing textile industries which gradually altered residents’ spatial practices through transforming SSP into manufacturing economy, inevitably demanding tremendous labour force and in turn local housing (Leung, 2011:12, 23, 244, 250).

At the days of post-war era while numerous immigrants chose to reside in SSP, whatever residential space they had, they were turned into a source of labour power, mostly serving for the age of thriving secondary productions, from the 1950s to the 1980s, with an even larger scale surpassing their pre-war predecessors, thanks also to SSP’s relatively low land price, which might be,
according to Smart and Tang (2014:239), in part due to a vicious cycle of disamenities resulted from enduring negative consequences of squatting and street sleeping within SSP.

With multiple incentives, the spaces of SSP again attracted oversea Chinese, entrepreneurs and industrialists from Shanghai and Guangzhou, evading from civil war with their industrial ensemble, to invest, still, primarily on garment and textile production. Within core study area in the 1950s and the 1960s where redevelopment was surging, manufacturing premises were also built, intermingled within residential spaces which also played a role in the industrial economy. Besides small-scale, single or multistorey factories, located along, for instance, Yee Kuk Street, Pei Ho Street, and Un Chau Street, there were also flat-based or even home-based (also known as saan zaai factory, 山寨廠), informal and unregistered workshops within residential buildings in where factory owners outsourced materials to households for processing, including clothing, toys, rattans, plastic product and hardware, in order to reduce production cost. Naturally, the thriving manufacturing industries had been attracting more people seeking for job opportunity to reside in SSP (Leung, 2011).

The consequences of such development were that, firstly, the continuous practices of subdivided flats, caged house, and illegal constructions, in creating additional residential and working spaces at the expense of dwellers’ spatial need, would also be a response to such development, which however formed a coherence of production chain, through an economy of agglomeration closely connected to street and residential spaces. These practices were dissipated following economic reconstruction—and spaces in SSP have then been more functionally separated. The decline of manufacturing industries then marked the outset of a redefinition of the overall SSP’s material space. In the period between the 1980s and the 1990s the reterritorialization of industrial activities from Hong Kong to the Mainland China rendered, without exception, many redevelopments of original low-rise industrial premises into high-rise private residential buildings, replacing the traces of obsoleted industrial-commercial activities. One typical example is the Golden Building (residential towers), Golden Computer Centre and Computer Arcade (podium) bounded at Un Chow Street and Fuk Wing Street.
5.3.4 Intervention of Urban Renewal Mechanism

In the 2000s residential redevelopment has regained its motivation through integrated institutional framework of conceived spaces, i.e. the URA. Seven redevelopment projects located at Sham Shui Po and Cheung Sha Wan areas were planned by the LDC in 1998 without implementation yet finally transferred to the URA for engagement, and later in 2002 five of them, within Cheung Sha Wan, were further taken over by the HKHS (Yip, 2001). As of 2014, within the core study area six renewal projects have been successfully launched, either in form of direct redevelopment or ‘Demand-Led Redevelopment Project Scheme’. Among the projects, Lai Chi Kok Road, Kweilin Street and Yee Kuk Street Development Scheme is expected completion by 2015 (‘Trinity Towers’, ‘丰滙’, cooperated with Cheung Kong Development Company); and Fuk Wing Street and Fuk Wah Street Scheme has been finished in 2009 (‘Vista’, ‘海峯’, with Sino Group). Four projects are undergoing in core study area, including Hai Tan Street/Kweilin Street and Pei Ho Street Development Scheme, and three demand-led projects: Tung Chau Street/Kweilin Street Project, 205-211A Hai Tan Street Project and 229A-G Hai Tan Street Project. Without exception the consequential spaces have been planned to be mixed-used real estate development, while the demand-led projects are not large-scale as they have been launched upon requests of the property owners from several buildings only, resulting in relatively small site. The socio-spatial consequences of the former two projects will be elucidated with cases in details in next chapter.

5.3.5 Trend of Architectural Development and Its Features

The pattern of housing development in the core study area of SSP is illustrated in figure 5.8, 5.9 and 5.10, showing the numbers and the average storey of existing residential, commercial building and, for comparison, four public rental housing estate and a HOS court built in each year, and the built year of all these buildings, as of the end of 2012. The construction of private property did not cease since the post-war era until 2004, but are not evenly distributed temporally, not only reflecting how historical events and contextual background kept on influencing the orientation of material development in SSP but also, more substantially, the transformative trajectory of conceived spaces, as legal
stipulations and government policies, which directly determined the qualitative and quantitative features of buildings and consequentially of the residential and commercial spaces of density.

Recently, there is still a large stock of buildings erected between the early 1950s and the early 1980s, especially during the decade after the implementation of Buildings Ordinance of 1955, representing the first wave of post-war (re)development over the pre-war urban fabric. At the time architectural form was dominated by reinforced concrete type of tenement. Such new tenements were more flexible and diverse, in terms of the number of storey and building size, than were the tenements erected in between 1935 to 1955 and more apparently the pre-1935 ones, thanks to the relief of stipulations. The former could have a floor area from 550 to 700 sq. ft. per unit (Lee, 2010:16). The flats of post-1955 tenements could still remain or even exceed such range of size and could be therefore partitioned into more than three units. Tenements remain major residential forms in SSP nowadays, implying that an important source of illegally constructed dwellings and subdivided units with area ranged from around 30 to 200 sq. ft. (Chan, 2013:121), because a tenement unit, unlike present private properties with irregular size and geometries, would have relatively simple and large physical structure to be conveniently subdivided into more units with corridors, as suggested Leeming (1977:26). Thus, a polarized floor area of space could then be found in a tenement. Subject to the considerations of legal and site constraint, between the mid-1950s and the 1960s constructions were in average no more than ten storeys for tenements, though some of them could still be tall and massive, exhausting the permitted maximum of building mass.

After 1970 the emergence of podium-tower residential building is a mark of a transitional period and a product of new representation of space, i.e. sliding scale plot ratio system, gradually changing housing conditions with generally higher rise building design. From the mid-1980s to around the mid-1990s a small wave of redevelopment activity revived, impelled by private developers targeted on industrial buildings or tenements built between the 1940s to the 1950. At the time tenement was basically no longer erected and property development became piecemeal.

When podium-tower building has become a mainstream choice of architectural design (while still being outnumbered by tenements), there are two
possible answers for the reasons of relatively higher average storey: the redevelopments were either conducted in a site large enough to build a tall, if still not slender, tower by taking advantage from the highest permitted plot ratio; or in a tiny site that constructing a horizontally massive block was impossible and only a small plot ratio was allowed, resulting in vertically slender one with only small flats. In other words, both could be tall but with disparate floor areas. Provided a trend of increasing average building height, most tower-podium blocks after mid-1980s, particularly after 1998 when height restriction was relieved, should belong to the former case, and for the latter, a flat could be found small to cause overcrowding, although non-tenement blocks are still a minority in SSP.

The economic fluctuations and downturn of private property development and market could contribute to a decrease in completion of housing each year but in the case of SSP it should be more related to a gradual saturation of land development and a disincentive of redevelopment due to its ever-increasing difficulties. The intervention of URA since the 2000s basically pushed the redevelopment into an even larger scale with huge residential blocks, massive commercial and leisure premises, and inconsistent flat sizes, substituting the homogeneous architectural cluster of tenement style building.

When in SSP the existence of tenement blocks remains a mainstream, it is not surprising that the stock of subdivided units is relatively high among all districts. The physical decay and the ‘waiting-for-renewal’ attitude towards the property market of tenement block, in which two are highly related, can be also attributed to such condition. Neither the dilapidated tenements attract buyers as self-occupier except investors, nor do property owners, desiring for URA’s acquisition as tenement market is declining and dwindling, will to rehabilitate their physical structure. For the speculators flat partition is the best choice to keep on consuming the space and extracting its exchange value as much as possible until the arrival of material reset under enhanced conceived spaces. Prior to this, such space will still be the home of a great deal of the urban underprivileged. This reveals how residential space in SSP has been stagnant and finally trapped physically by adjacent material spaces and abstractly by increasingly rigid processes in producing, consuming, and imposing values on space.
Figure 5.8 The number and the average storey of existing buildings in core study area built in each year (as of the end of 2012)
(Data source: Database of Private Buildings in Hong Kong, Home Affairs Department, 2012)
Figure 5.9  A 2.5D image showing the built year of all buildings in core study area including public housings and HOS (as of the end of 2012) 
(Data source: ibid.)
Figure 5.10 A bird-view image showing the built year of all buildings in core study area including public housings and HOS (as of the end of 2012) (Data source: ibid.)
5.4 Street and Commercial Space Development

5.4.1 Development and Management of Street Life as Local Economy

Urban density has also been manifested in another way and subject to implicit density controls: a fluid human-material concentration on streets as wide-ranged practices of everyday life, extending itself to another aspect of space: external space, as opposed yet highly related to living space, where individuals gain subsistence or resources or earn their livelihood, etc. Streets and their subsidiary spatial practices are substantial for residents, in a sense that they can escape from their ‘trap’ of interior residential space.

Given a uncluttered combination of urban fabric comprising several tens of blocks of mixed use residential buildings, mostly tenements, whenever they were erected, without alternative, the ‘gaps’ among the grid network formed under such land development mechanism have to act as a realm where its spatial vitality has been propped by residents and other spatial users spending time on the streets in fulfilling various demands through contest and competition of spatial practices in occupying or even cramming into limited space, such as hawking, squatting, roadside encroaching for production or commercial activities, running businesses in premises, or simply passing by. The street space on one hand contains a great deal of social activities entailing their own spatio-temporality; it has also compromised with post-war transports development which have gradually occupied a large portion of road space exclusively for motor vehicles, further reducing available spaces for those activities.

The spatio-temporal variations of concentrating spatial practices on streets resulted in a dense streetscape from disorder to ‘tame’ one, due to the interventions of conceived spaces such as the government’s transforming policies determining the eligibility of access to street space by hawker policy, pedestrianization and so on, gradually converting it from a chaotic space with hybrid spatial practices into more functionally simplified one. These policies point towards a strengthened manipulation of spatio-temporality over SSP’s street space in eradicating ‘disamenities’. Physical intensity on the streets in SSP is then also socially produced: these government policies can be described as, argued Leeming (1977:19), ‘the principle of the separation of uses’, in matching different spatial practices to their own designated spaces and reducing spatial complexity.

As early as 1950s, along the pedestrian walkways around, for instance,
Cheung Sha Wan Road, Nam Cheong Street, Yu Chau Street, Kweilin Street, Shun Ning Road, Tai Nan Street and Pei Ho Street were the clustering points of hawkers selling vegetables and poultries, contained in rattan baskets or nylon cloth bags which the hawkers shouldered, moving easily to any place wherever they could do business. Surrounding Pei Ho Street market there were even more hawkers, who offered cheaper products than those did within the market, attracting a huge crowd of residents purchasing daily necessities. The hawkers, customers, passers-by and traffic situation together created a scene of congestion and disorder in the daytime. The then Urban Council, confronting with the nuisances and environmental and hygienic issues while also considering hawkers’ needs, introduced the schemes of fixed pitch hawker stall (固定小販攤檔) and off-street bazaar, and a new license system for original licensed hawkers and itinerant hawkers to bid for on-site pitches for selling cooked food or commodities not sold in markets, intending to limit their spatial reach along kerbsides of the roads, and in turn leaving the central area for passage and vehicles. Permitted and prohibited hawking areas were as well designated in the late 1960s. Nevertheless, such efforts were basically in vain that licensed hawkers and ground-floor shops were still disturbed by unlicensed vendors (ibid. p.101-3; 254-8) (see figure 5.11).

The continuous undersupply of hawking space, hygienic and nuisance issue and overburden on market spaces finally pressed the government to react, with a two-way strategy of street ‘purification’ in SSP: introducing a renewed Hawker Permitted Area Schemes in 1973 and a new phased programme of Hawker Permitted Places Scheme in 1979 while increasing market premises and relocating licensed hawkers to rebuilt municipal services buildings or hawker bazaars. The Urban Council reissued on-street fixed pitch hawker license allocating each of the vendors with a pitch of specific size and with cubicles and cabinets for storing products. They have then been allowed to occupy a larger space for showcasing and selling products during a designated business time. Some of them were moved to hawker bazaars at Nam Cheong Street and Yen Chow Street, while only the latter remains operating until recently. Since then no new license has been further issued so as to achieve a natural decline on the absolute number of hawker, and they have been subject to the stipulation of the Public Health and Municipal Services Ordinance and its subsidiary law, the Hawker Regulation.

Beginning from 1979 in core study area there have been five streets with
permitted hawker area including Apliu Street, Tai Nan Street, Fuk Wah Street, Kweilin Street and Pei Ho Street. Meanwhile, enforcement against unlawful hawking activities and the misuse of hawker space has been strengthened with rising manpower for street management teams and operations and more rigorous than that in the past. Nowadays unofficially recognized hawking, including second-hand electric appliance trade by Southeast Asians, under a strict spatial distribution and management, is either spatially marginalized to outer streets with small pedestrian flow, or occur randomly on a densely populated street under a risk of being expelled.

A redevelopment of single-storey Pei Ho Street market into a nine-storey municipal services building in 1992 helped to further reduce and relocate on-street pitch hawkers, selling fresh product and foodstuff, such as fish, meat, poultries, and vegetable, into the indoor units of wet market and cooked food centre, leaving the original hawker stalls for selling only dry products and for an emergence of new businesses, such as a cluster of trading electronic or electric devices and appliances at Apliu Street, expanding the source of pedestrian (ibid.).

Since then, the number of daytime hawker in SSP district has an apparent decline through time. A hawker survey conducted in 1969 shows that in the district there were 4,131 hawkers operating in permitted areas and 2,916 people in other streets (Mayger, 1970, HKRS480-1-3); in 1986 the Urban Council managed around 3,000 fixed pitch hawkers and 3,475 peddlers within the district (Leung, 2011:256); and there were 1,347 licensed on-street hawkers in the district in 2000 and 1,214 in 2005 (Chow, 2005:3,8), compared to the Hong Kong overall of only around 6,092 in early 2014 (Food and Environmental Hygiene Department, 2014:12).
Figure 5.11  Photos showing hawker activities along different streets of SSP, c.1970 (with original captions)
Photos showing congested streetscape filled with hawker stalls and pedestrians in 1979 (Top: Pei Ho Street)

(Source: Information Services Department, HKSARG, quoted in Leung, 2011:17,30)
Market or hawking could once be in a temporary squatting form on streets. The aftermath of Shek Kip Mei conflagration had brought hundreds of squatters who lost their business premises in the original squatter settlement into Nam Cheong Street, a relatively spacious street at the time with a rain nullah along where commercial tenants could hawk. Few years later after converting it into an underdrain, the government issued hawker license to the victims and allocated each of them a space of fixed pitch stall with uniform size, which was however expanded by their owner, gradually transformed into a row of more than two hundred tightly packed, multistorey, mixed used residential-commercial squatter huts along the middle way of the whole street, running businesses such as hardware, furniture, construction material, ironware workshop, etc. Again, the scale of such squatting form attracted the accusations of producing nuisances of hygiene, traffic, and ‘urban appearance’ resulting in a refusal of renewing license by the then Urban Services Department and ultimately a clearance in the 1980s and altering the original site into a park in a band shape, which has rendered a large portion of Nam Cheong Street being occupied for transport and leisure space unable to be squatted in a large scale again (Leung, 2011:256-7).

In addition, since 2001 a phased pedestrianization scheme has been adopted in SSP includes two elements (see figure 4.5): Part-time Pedestrian Street, applied to the partial sections of Apliu Street, Fu Wah Street, Pei Ho Street, and Kweilin Street, where vehicular access is completely prohibited during the period from 12 p.m. to 9 p.m. every day; and Traffic Calming Street where pedestrian-friendly measures are adopted, such as widening footpaths and reducing parking spaces, etc. (Transport Department, 2014b). Since then these streets as the major concentration nodes of pedestrian have revealed an even purer commercial-pedestrian relation.

5.4.2 Commercial Premises and Influences on Street Spaces

Besides street hawking, commercial premises have also contributed to street life and the manifestation of urban density. Their roles have been susceptible to any variation of socio-economic context—from businesses primarily targeting to local residents for daily necessities and services, to an agglomerative economy like textile-related wholesale and retail trades responding to the rise of manufacturing, and to a cluster of selling non-essentials and services such as
electronic and electric devices and computer related products. The latter emerged in the 1980s particularly due to an improved accessibility and in turn financial opportunities by the MTR since the late 1970s, especially for several streets with entries of the railway. The clustering effect has still existed due to such locational advantage and differentiation of rent for certain kinds of business to thrive and to occupy particular street spaces with distinct quantities and sources of pedestrian flow. Commercial spaces in SSP have however not replaced each other but instead widened the spectrum of local economy to cover local and territorial demands on consumption, and to intensifying pedestrian flow by people all over Hong Kong as potential consumers. Comparing to hawker activities, commercial premises manifest themselves as strong functional fragmentation and singularized space, also characterizing street spaces.

Physically speaking, there have been three major types of commercial premises in SSP: the first one (and also most of them) is as part of a tenement occupying the ground floor, in which some of them were subdivided into several units with the same length of the tenement, and in some cases attached to an upper floor cockloft for warehouse, extended premises or residential use. They also form two edges of a street that their frontages or entries openly face streetwise, rendering an intimate connection and a blurred boundary between the public and private space especially when spatial encroachment occurred. The second one is podium style, multistorey commercial blocks under a non-tenement residential tower, which revealing an even stronger tendency of spatial-functional fragmentation, underpinning dichotomies between the public and the privatized space; the pedestrians and the customers; as well as the commercial and the residential. They manifested a nearly isolated nature that the premises, within an internal space which have been subdivided into units for rent, is only connected to external street space with such an entry space as a hallway or a stairway, consuming pedestrian density by absorbing it into their concealed spaces; and the final one is independent commercial towers, similar to the second one in nature while in a larger scale. The increase of the latter two through urban renewal enhances the purification of spatial practices in both the street and the commercial spaces. In other words, street will be thus increasingly expected to be a channel to targeted locations, more than an encroached space for extending any spatial practice. The subdivision of commercial units and the encroachment of public
street space as an extension of working platform, for placing products, or even a part of premises are still commonly seen, though for the latter not more popular and furious than before due to more stringent control, remaining a competitive status of the street space where pedestrians and commercial activities intermingle with each other.

5.4.3 Consequential Features of Street Spaces and Implications on Urban Density

Under such historical development, two general features of the street-commercial space in SSP can be summarized: transient encounters and a tendency towards simplified functions and spatial practices discouraging durable visit and halt at certain point but continuous movements, with minor exceptions when sufficient space is provided.

Transient encounters involve movement, intermixed and interfered with any static practices, such as making a halt in front of a store for consumption or waiting for traffic signals at crossings, forming different clusters of density, in which dynamic and static one together cover most of the street space, especially during business hours. Except in a few cases that sufficient space is attached to a street, the physical setting of SSP’s streets basically avoids unnecessary, enduring non-movement of pedestrians particularly when it may cause obstruction to the operation of businesses until they are close or when there is no further reason for ceasing mobility. Some streets are with relatively slight or even virtually absent flow of pedestrian, which are nonetheless characterized usually with narrow pavements so as to also prevent from any possibility of static encroachment except as a part of a commercially used space. Thoroughfares like Yen Chow Street and Cheung Sha Wan Road, and Lai Chi Kok Road have similarly narrow pavement yet strong and relatively evenly distributed pedestrian flow throughout a day, though the abovementioned spatial settings and practices of other streets can also be found from them so that durable halt on such streets will also become less desirable.

Moreover, subject to street management mechanisms including hawker control, pedestrianization scheme, and strengthened enforcement of preventing unnecessary and unlawful encroachment, streets in SSP are virtually homogenously designed and functioned. Such situation has been further
underpinned when a large portion of road space has been assigned to vehicles, rendering a general practice of concentrating people’s movement on even narrower walkways. When the conceived spaces of street management incline towards smooth commercial operations and pedestrian flows, the primary function of a street is then merely be a channel to transports nodes and to through commerce-led spatial practices offer resources to residents, who demand for any form of consumption and have predetermined locations and targets, coming from both local and other districts depending on the features of the clusters of economic activities and facilities.

Thus, the intensity on the streets of SSP manifests itself as tremendous transient encounters of agencies, focusing especially on streets and thoroughfares where MTR station and collective transports nodes lie, serving as concentration and connection points of passers-by throughout the day and as crucial means of commuting at the peak hours in the morning and evening. Those streets are also for logistic workers as well as stores and hawkers selling daily necessities or non-essential consumer products throughout the daytime (peaked in the afternoon when all stores are operating, while wet market begins to run their businesses relatively earlier in the morning and some stores is also open earlier on Sunday), forming unstable clusters of concentration and flow until most premises are closed after around 9 to 10 p.m.

Streets with hawker pitches and those which have been pedestrianized have caused another kind of intensity and disruption of movement flow from even larger cluster of walkers, though also with transient encounters and monotonous spatial practices. The streets with hawker pitches, especially at the business hours have until recently greatly contributed to even higher material intensity, comparing to other street space with normal pedestrian pavement-road mode, since the two rows of stalls occupied a large piece of space as along two kerbsides of original vehicle road, isolating walkways together with the façades of buildings, and resulting in only narrow paths for pedestrians and more fierce competition over the remaining space among vehicles which are both parked or in motion, goods, walkers, and on-street space users, not only discouraging a standstill of people but generating a turbulence of flow in which people are accustomed to walk through the middle of the roads instead of the pavements (also as a fleeting spatial practices of resisting presupposed locations for pedestrian movement).
In addition, an obvious practice of preventing a street from functioning like a public open space is that there is a virtual elimination of the existence of leisure and gathering space on street: spaces for sitting and resting on the streets are rare, with only a very few exceptions of the façades of Pei Ho Street Municipal Services Building, certain corners of road junctions, and some planter kerbs, railings, and seats around the MTR exits at Apliu Street, which allow majorly the elderly to gather at day time during business hours which however bring out relatively high pedestrian density.

In sum, street-commercial space development is a historical product that a grid shape street block contour of SSP in favour of neat land distribution and residential development, established since the early twentieth century, has to gradually compromise with modern automobile transports system which created a clear-cut between walkways and vehicle roads at the expense of original open public space, and in turn street space gained a taken-for-granted relation with commercial activities and legally, physically eliminated the possibility of a re-emergence of collective, large-scale spatial practices of residential-related activities, such as squatting. The existence of commercial premises with monotonous yet organized spaces of consumption aggregately creates the huge clusters of individuals in a short term, which are highly controlled, non-permanent, and transient. Then, a street is a target-oriented space, underpinning a dichotomy of residential-exterior space which can as a result pushes the spatial and empirical charging of residential density towards a maximum level if one’s ability or willingness to escape from such material density is weak.

5.5 Summary

Propped by the argument about the implication of conceived spaces from chapter 4, this chapter has further tracked SSP’s historical development of material spaces and spatial practices, in terms of land, housing, and street development. There have been different processes in altering urban intensity under conflicts or reconciliations between individuals’ social needs—derived from socio-economic transitions, lived experiences, and resistance—and the development of conceived spaces which have unfolded their implications and tendency towards more homogenous, mechanically planned, and/or capitalist-oriented control on the conducts of every individual and on the
production of functionally fragmented and separated residential and street-commercial spaces and relations, heavily subject to land market and development and the underlying mechanism of exchange value and legal stipulations i.e. building, zoning, plot ratio, etc. They are an overwhelming force in converting man-land relations into less relying on natural endowment but gradually more depending on the transformation of institutionalized urban fabric. This tends towards a purification or a reduction of complexity and hybridity of space and at the individual level towards fewer alternatives to secure and produce personal spaces for dwelling and other spatial practices of everyday life and to avert from such high density living when spaces are strictly categorized and attached to more social identities, as illustrated with more details in the next chapter.
Chapter 6
Living with(out) Density
Individuals Social Spaces: Past, Present, and Future

6.1 Introduction

The previous chapters have explained how SSP’s general, multivariate spatio-temporalities have been produced and altering through dominant conceived spaces and their implications on the physical space and collective spatial practices of SSP. There have also been contradictions and conflicts of spatial meanings—a ‘battle’ between conceived spaces and spatial practices embodied by lived spaces, i.e. symbolic significances that individuals impose to spaces, guiding their spatio-temporal practices as an everyday life resisting or adopting physical or social constraints. The contradiction of general lived spaces against the conceived spaces could be interpreted as each historical turning point for a reason that original urban spatiality did not meet diverse social expectations and thus new spatial practices and representations followed to reshape the social space, meanwhile to undermine the ability of collective resistance.

When it comes to individual level, however, the lived spaces reveal to be more diverse, though their origin can still be traced, given that they are significantly subject to shared spatio-temporal processes and similar physical setting. Individuals’ own socio-economic background may also contribute to variations, widening the meanings of urban density and the conflicts between the conceived spaces and lived spaces. Therefore, this chapter, extending the previous discussion, aims to put it into a deeper and more intensive level through the lens of individual experiential, historical processes, which incorporate more variations such as categorized socio-economic elements diversifying lived spaces and spatial practices. Then there is an investigation on how the general socio-spatial processes of producing urban density interact with those variations and finally generate differences or uniformities; compliance or conflicts and contradictions between or among the agents of space and the producers of knowledge, competing to impose significances upon intensively developed space.

This chapter will be built upon cases from personal or household based interviews, focusing mainly on their spatial practices, as (in)abilities in producing
and utilizing space, and lived spaces imposed on residential spaces and exterior environments, i.e. street-commercial spaces. The discussion finally reveals again how the implications of generating these two sorts of intensive social space, as elucidated in chapter 4 and 5, work at individual level: spatial traps and mismatches, and the intervention of urban renewal mechanism reconfiguring material density and social composition, while erasing intangible past by neutralized, default space. The discussion therefore emphasizes on a historical path of urban density development, from the past to the present, and marching towards the future.

6.2 Spatial Practices and Lived Spaces at Individual Level

Before probing deeper into each case, a remark regarding spatial practice and lived space should be made. From a local, district (or even larger scale) point of view, spatial practices are observed with relatively regularized patterns and collectivities, if not freed from intrinsic disharmonies and conflicts; while at individual level, personal experiences and features, spatio-temporality, and social identities as eligibility to access to space come with greater distinctions, complicating conflicts between the conceived and the lived, if not totally detached from any generalizing process above such geographical level. At individual level spatial practices do not involve density all the time with no variation, whatever forms they are. As both subjective perceptions of certain material spaces and routine physical encounter or exposure to the spaces of certain conditions, it is argued that the spatial practices in SSP commonly hinge on two forms of space: residential and street-commercial one. The questions are, then, when, how, and where are density and non-density experienced, implying differentiations among social groups such as the qualities and quantities of density they are living with, the duration of exposure, and the modes of encountering.

Residential space is fixed, demarcated, static form of density, in which inhabitants settle at one point and freely or involuntarily moves to another. It at least incorporates such elements as size, interior contents, exchange value, relative location; while street-commercial space, if not without those elements, also involves more on dynamics, movement, and transient encounter among concentrated, static material settings. Comparing with the density of exterior environment, the experience of residential density is however compulsory. When
both of them have continuous interaction with an inhabitant of specific social-economic characteristics, there would also be distinct duration and pattern of exposure: undesirable or essential physical densities that individuals experience could, for instance, can last long for a whole day with strong and unceasing perceptions and mental responses when no way-out has been found, or can be insignificant or even irrelevant in residential form with no consciousness of being intensively charged with density, while being able to evict into an external environment in a transient manner. The unevenly distributed social ability to experience or not experience certain kind of density for different social groups is then attributed to different sorts of consequence and implication.

Living through such multifaceted social-physical environment and mixing with distinct past experiences and social status, lived spaces which are generated from different symbolic values and subjective perceptions are revealed as different conditions: they can be a compliance with prevailing socio-spatial processes, yet meanwhile also a conflict, a ‘gap’, and a compromise between the very processes in producing ordered spaces and their own expectations of life which is to a certain extent also produced by the former. The lived space can be attached to spaces at various levels, from a relatively small space like home, to a larger region such as SSP as a whole.

6.3 Background of Interviewees

Four cases will be discussed comprehensively. They are chosen to represent the multifaceted aspects of urban density in SSP: in terms of residential situation, they cover four major types of dwellings and in turn four kinds of interior material densities in core study area, i.e. tenement flat, non-tenement private housing flat, rooftop houses, and subdivided unit; in terms of social identities, both local inhabitants and new immigrants are concerned. These identities which inscribe more social-economic features to the interviewees have shaped their physical and mental experiences with urban density; and in terms of the everyday life and temporal variations of spatial practices, the interviewees have engaged in different occupations, requiring either home-staying or working at premises, and revealed their own pattern in dealing with living densities. Specially two cases, incorporating the property owner of tenement units and non-legally recognized housing respectively, have involved into urban renewal project, assisting to
unravel the processes of how urban renewal, as the major force of future urban density development, reproduces physical spaces while generates contradictions with other socio-spatial elements. Their basic information is summarized as a table below:

### Table 6.1  Background of interviewees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Codename*</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Recent Type of Accommodation/ Location of Premises</th>
<th>Social Identity</th>
<th>Date of Interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1*</td>
<td>A’s Family</td>
<td>Mr. A</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Decoration worker</td>
<td>Rooftop house on tenement</td>
<td>Mainland Immigrant (After 2000s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mrs. A</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Full-time school worker</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3*</td>
<td>Mrs. C</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>Apparel store owner</td>
<td>Full tenement units (cockloft)</td>
<td>Local</td>
<td>2014-3-3 2014-3-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Mr. D</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Freelance artist</td>
<td>Non-tenement private housing</td>
<td>Local</td>
<td>2014-11-4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*To keep interviewees anonymous, codenames are used instead of real surnames.  
*They have involved in redevelopment project led by URA.

### 6.4 Density from the Past: Residential Space as Traps and Mismatches

#### 6.4.1 Experiences of ‘Building on a Building’

A’s family, a new arrival household from a rural region of Guangdong Province, has four members including Mrs. and Mr. A and their two daughters. Mr. A (40 years old at the time of interviews) became Hong Kong permanent resident in the early 2000s, got married with Mrs. A (aged 35) and have had their elder daughter (aged 9) in the Mainland who were later eligible to move to Hong Kong. Mrs. A formally migrated to Hong Kong in 2004 by two-way permit and was offered one-way permit in the late 2007. Younger daughter (aged 5) was later born in Hong Kong.

At the very beginning the household have already rooted themselves into SSP, to a large extent due to financial considerations and eligibility for alternative residential choices. With low education level and in order to take care of their children, especially during the days after the birth of their younger daughter, and to cope with occasional health problems, the couple at the earliest days in Hong Kong could not simultaneously engage in full-time job for a long time. Their underemployment thus rendered unstable household income (in average slightly
more than 10,000 HKD per month) and a tight budget for housing or other spending, after allowing for necessary household expenditure, such as electricity and water bills, and education fees for two daughters, etc. At the time of interviews Mrs. A was a school worker while Mr. A was a part-time decorator and had planned to be a steel fixer when both their daughters have been studying at primary school so that less time would be spent to look after them.

The family has experiences of living in subdivided flat and they were residing in rooftop house at the time of interviews. However, the illicit nature of rooftop house has brought them a trouble as a wave of redevelopment and requisition of real estate agency has swept their home in 2011 when receiving bailiff’s notices, unexpectedly disturbing, interfering their daily life with lawsuit until URA has intervened into their living space by commencing a ‘demand-led’ redevelopment project in April 2013 (Tung Chau Street/Kweilin Street Demand-Led Redevelopment Project). Due to a lack of access to social information, they began their application procedure for public housing only in 2008 and still had no response as of October 2013.

Some statistical data can aid to depict the recent situations of this group of resident like Mr. and Mrs. A, as new immigrants after the 2000s. According to CSD, by district council district, the median monthly domestic household income in 2001, 2006 and 2011 in SSP district was HKD 14,000, 13,500, and 16,280 respectively, being always the lowest among all districts (CSD, 2002; 2007a; 2012c). When it comes to the types of housing, the figure is much worse: for families residing in ‘temporary housings’, including rooftop structure, the median monthly domestic household income was only HKD 8,000 in 2011 (CSD, 2012c). On the other hand, SSP district had the highest proportion of ‘persons from the Mainland having resided in Hong Kong for less than 7 Years’ (PMRs), which was 5.128% of total district population (369,322 people) in 2011. In terms of absolute numbers, SSP district, though showing a trend of decline, was also the second highest after Kwun Tong, with 25,814 (out of 346,483), 20,787 (out of 357,544) and 18,939 in 2001, 2006 and 2011 respectively (while there was only 14,246 out of 365,927 in 1996), revealing that SSP is a relatively popular residential space for the PMRs (CSD, 2012d:60-1; 2007b:58). In 2011, only 45.1% of PMRs in Hong Kong resided in public rental housing (CSD, 2012d:56).

Their residential experience is generally a struggle between stable, secured
shelter, and minimum expense and social contact for sustaining daily life within SSP’s space at its transitional period from physical decay to renewal. Before the marriage, Mr. A had already settled in an extremely small subdivided cockloft in SSP, which could even not let a person stand straight, let alone house a family with three more people. Between 2004 and 2006 they moved twice within the same district to a larger yet still not self-contained subdivided flat and then to a rooftop house at Yee Kuk Street, both in tenement buildings. Nonetheless, the practices of sharing public facilities with poor appearances and conditions and a sense of insecurity from their neighbours towards elder daughter, due to possible nuisances of suspected person like addicts who could freely access to the buildings, pushed the couple to shift for a better place—though it was merely a matter of location rather than types of dwelling. Later they have chosen to reside in a building at Tung Chau Street until recently, renting a partitioned flat for around two years and several months with 1,800 HKD per month and finally brought a rooftop house, built in the early 1970s, without any written contract, from its owner who however did not possess the legal ownership of the rooftop, implying that without official register such ‘property right’ was not legally protected and recognized. After weighing the amount between monthly rent and one-time payment, which was equivalent to the rent of a year, and the duration they could stay at such dwelling when they were aware of acquisition being conducted by a real estate company, Richfield Group (田生集團), in the late 2007, they considered the trade advantageous, despite a risk of eviction.

The building was constructed in the mid-1960s with 152 units, with a plenty of subdivided flats and 13 rooftop houses (Home Affairs Department, 2012; Sharp Daily, 2013-1-10). This is a typical product during the transitional period, between 1956 and 1966, of the Building Ordinance and its subsidiary stipulation, the Building (Planning) Regulations of 1956, prior to its amendment for introducing new sliding scale plot ratio schedule. The building occupies a large site, around one third of a street block, but construction process has not resulted in a skyscraper due to a common practice at the time that a residential block was designed with nine floors only in order to avoid sacrificing sellable space for adding lift shafts, as exempted from the ordinances stating that lifts should be installed in construction with or more than ten storeys. The permitted potential increase of material density could then finally be concretized after more than fifty
years with an URA-led redevelopment project.

The rooftop house is made of iron sheets and wood planks, reinforced with cement, and built on the freely accessible rooftop where there is a wide unobstructed flat space (see figure 6.1 and 6.2). Although its surface area, approximately 360 sq. ft. (i.e. with a occupancy rate around 90 sq. ft. per person), has an obvious improvement compared to their previous ones, the residential density is still greater than that of newly built public housing units in today’s standard—since 1993 actual average occupancy rate was more than 90 sq. ft. per person and it was 140 sq. ft. in 2013 (refer to table 4.2). Their house is partitioned with planks into living room, bedroom, and storeroom with basic furniture and electric appliances. With very limited available space for more cupboards and wardrobes, the strategy of storage hinges on some bunk beds given from their neighbours, by which miscellaneous things were placed on the upper bed, though they have used up a large piece of space. As for hygienic issues, the toilet just occupies a tiny piece of space and there is no flush water supply but freshwater, also for shower. With merely thin metal sheets and planks as overall wall structure, leaking happened and was dealt with mere temporary measures by placing plastic banner on roof. Being an interior decorator, Mr. A attempted to rehabilitate the house but such act could hardly conceal its dilapidation. Nevertheless, breaking away from their previous living experiences in tiny subdivided flats, to decant to such independent small house at least offers A’s family a space for self-contained, completed household activities. Its exterior area on the rooftop as well provides a larger, extended space for other use, being for instance a ‘playground’ for the children and a place for hanging out washings, which cannot be found in subdivided suites with a totally isolated, indoor setting.

Their lived imaginations on residential space, on the other hand, should also be examined. To Mrs. A there has been a gradual acceptance of their recent residential situation: living in SSP for more than ten years yet still lacking financial stability and social support, their opportunity to be rehoused to public housing has remained unknown. Confronting with a harsh urban reality which has praised for rigid capitalist ‘rules of game’ in allocating space, she expressed a shrieking expectation on living space, abandoning any imagination for a better housing anymore and even preferring a status quo without thinking if she could deserve better, but could only project on the future from her daughters:
‘...I wanted to change the lifestyle, but I stopped thinking about it when considering my economic ability. Therefore I hope this place [rooftop house] would not be changed and I could keep on living in it until my children have growth up. I don’t mind climbing up staircases so high everyday—at least I don’t need to pay rent and rates, etc.’...

‘I wish I can live [in the rooftop house] until my daughters begin their careers...I can use the money which was supposed to be used for the rent to nurture my daughters.’

A space without a burden of rent, yet at the same time within a building space trapping its potential of renewal in stagnancy, was attractive to her and the family given their financial status—even though she knew this would not last long—the mechanism of urban (re)development, of course, would not simply let her wish come true. Moreover, an experience of spatial decantation might also contribute to her preference of status quo:

‘In fact I felt comfortable when I had just moved to this house, and did not think it was overcrowded...Whereas when comparing with the dense subdivided flats in the past, in my heart I have already felt comfortable.’

‘...although our environment is still pretty bad that we have to live in rooftop house...it is happy to have a shelter. Moreover, my living has already been improved. Living here is always better than living in subdivided flat and suite with a size of several tens square feet...’

In the interviews she emphasized frequently that a space of dwelling was all about a sense of security—securing their own shelter for stability without sharing with others and preventing from dangers:

‘...subdivided flat is complicated with persons of many kinds...The flat I lived was very bad and gloomy. Toilet and kitchen were shared...Especially later when an addict moved in and I worried that he would endanger or threaten my daughter when she had to walk through the kitchen or go outside. Therefore I discussed with my husband to find and move to a better place...’

‘At the time I thought of nothing [about the facilities of dwelling] but mainly personal safety—do not harm my two daughters and to have a shelter. Those days I just all required for the minimum, and never demanded for, say, luxurious decoration and so on, as everyone knew the situation.’

However, with an uncertainty of rehousing treatment offered by URA, a real space of security is still an illusion to her. A limited transport cost that she could afford and a small spatial reach due to localized daily activities and works results in very practical reasons to stay living at SSP, after being rooted into SSP for
around ten years: convenience for livelihood and relatively low spending comparing to other districts:

‘At the beginning it was hard to leave [SSP] when lacking information. But this place makes me feel relatively relieved to settle down because of its low spending... I have once been in Shatin and saw people buy fruits and so on, and I really thought that things in this place [SSP] were cheap. Therefore I stayed here as expenses would grow bigger if I left this district and I could not handle it.

‘I always see information mainly...like what kind of food is cheaper for dinner—it is all about how to spend money so that I can save it without wasting it. At the time I have never thought of leaving this district.’

‘Someone contacted us [after the commencement of URA redevelopment scheme] but we all strived for rehousing in the same district as I work here and my daughters go to school nearby, except my husband has a cross-district job. Then my family has no need to adapt a new place.’

When it comes to the imagination of the future development of SSP under urban renewal, she expressed a pessimistic yet practical, if not totally true, point of view against an expectation of better physical environment for their daily life when land has been dominated by capitalist processes of real estate development, implying an exclusion of any chance for access to those renewal residential space given their financial status:

‘I think it is impossible [to build more public housings in SSP]...The government will not build public housings in a place with a convenience of transports and let us take the train so easily. They must talk about market value and build more skyscrapers to enhance their wealth.’

‘When it comes to urban development, it will unwittingly turn SSP into the second Central by building many skyscrapers. As a result commodity prices rise and it is unfair to grassroots consumers...there will be no place for the grassroots like us.’

‘I would prefer living in a dangerous building to dwelling in the ‘second Central’, if I could not be able to afford [daily spending].’
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Figure 6.1  Photos showing the exterior and interior settings of A’s family’s rooftop house
(Source: author)

Figure 6.2  A simple floor plan of A’s family’s rooftop house
6.4.2 Tenement: A Polarized Residential Density

The case of A’s family illustrates a process of slow spatial decantation and a weak residential mobility due to a spatial trap derived from their social identities. Housing decantation, however, is not necessarily achievable for everyone to escape from the influences of residential density, physically or at least mentally. Whilst some could never need to concern with such problem, some are just desperate for their inability to do so. A tenement can epitomize such contrast within the same material fabric and is probably the only one sort of housing which can put the contrast into an extreme, ranging from a subdivided flat—in all possible forms of partitioned rooms such as ‘cage houses’, suites, bedspaces, and cubicles, etc.—which can be less than 100 sq. ft., to a self-contained, non-partitioned residential unit with more than 700 sq. ft. According to Policy 21 (2013), commissioned by the Long Term Housing Strategy Steering Committee of the government to conduct a survey on recent situation of subdivided units, defined as a space ‘formed by the subdivided of individual living quarters into two or more units for rental purposes to more than one household’ (p.31) 4, in 2013 in Kowloon there were 9,300 buildings aged twenty-five years or above containing totally 33,300 subdivided units and households and housing 81,600 people (p.33-4, 37). Kowloon alone shared almost half (49.8%) of the total number of unit in Hong Kong (66,900) (p.35). With a large stock of tenement buildings, the inner city area of SSP inevitably contributes significantly to such phenomenon accompanied with the most extreme form of residential density in Hong Kong which therefore cannot be ignored.

The following two cases—a new immigrants dwelling in subdivided flats and a native resident who owned a flat and commercial unit in a tenement—attempt to

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4 There are recently no unified legal definitions on subdivided unit, which embraces a wide range of type of dwelling. The terms such as cubicles (廳房/板間房), bedspaces (床位), cocklofts (閣仔), caged houses (籠屋), ‘coffin rooms’ (棺材房), suites (套房), and ‘inadequate housing’ (不適切居所), or those simply subordinate to other umbrella terms, have been used by both the general public or the government under various contexts or administrative needs. In other words, available statistical surveys related to subdivided flat, whether conducted by the government (CSD), academic, or non-governmental organizations, are not necessarily consistent or accurate to reflect the reality due to disparate definitions. Statistics are hitherto mainly based on inferential calculation rather than actual counting, except those of CSD which are however not all-rounded (Chan, 2013). The definition employed by Policy 21 is relatively inclusive.
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reflect such contrast and how residential densities within the same type of building space vary in spatial significances and processes.

6.4.2.1 Subdivided flats

Mrs. B is a new arrival coming to Hong Kong in 2004 through one-way permit, and her husband, also an immigrant, came to Hong Kong in 2000 as urged by Mrs. B. They have three sons: a nineteen year-old elder brother who dropped out from secondary school, and has now been an apprentice of decoration. The other two are twin brothers and now primary five students. Recently this family of five is economically supported only by her husband, as a casual labour of decoration in construction site. Counting salary on a daily basis, the family has also an unstable income (around 10,000 HKD per month) especially when his job is suspended due to inclement weather. Before 2008 they were living in a cubicle at Sai Yeung Choi Street North, in which facilities were shared and the household had to be crammed into a tiny bed, in exchange of a relatively low rent of 1,200 HKD. Now they have moved to a slightly larger subdivided flat, in form of suite, at Wong Chuk Street, found through a real estate company, with a size of around 150 sq. ft. (i.e. an occupancy rate of only around 30 sq. ft. per person which does not even meet pre-1973 public housing spatial standard) and costing them initially 3,200 dollars, generating a greater expense and burden to them, and in turn even quarrels between the couple. Until recently, the property owner has raised the rent at least for three times, further worsening household’s financial situation.

Their path for housing decantation is similarly long without a clear goal: applying for eight years, far longer than the promised waiting period of three years, they finally received a notification for public housing unit allocation three days before the interview in July 2014, but they decided to reject the offer. The unit was at Hing Man Estate, Chai Wan, which they considered to be too inconvenient for their children to commute to school at Cheung Sha Wan every day, especially when there is even a twenty-minute walking distant between Chai Wan railway station and the estate. Transport cost was another major consideration as the family goes to work mainly at Kowloon. Located at a hill slope, the overall environment of the estate as well did not impress Mrs. B that she described it as ‘prison-like’. While a crucial opportunity of decantation was given up and led to an unsatisfactory result, she has to continue to confront with
the cramped space.

Wong Chuk Street is dominated by typically massive and tall tenements, built between the late 1950s to the 1970s. The block they have been dwelling in has nine storeys (Home Affairs Department, 2012) and their flat is at sixth floor within a unit subdivided into three independent rooms, among which their flat has the most expensive rent and it consists of a living room, a bedroom, a kitchen, and a toilet but all of them are crammed into a tiny space (see figure 6.3). Similar to A’s family, two double-deck bunk beds have been put into the bedroom and the living room respectively to create additional vertical spaces, which have already used up a large portion of indoor space, leaving a narrow ‘corridor’ to move around. To exhaust vertical space, both beds have been elevated to render a larger room under the beds for storage. However, unlike the rooftop house of A’s family which gives relatively sufficient space for placing furniture, a bed could not even be put into the bedroom without cutting it short. In the living room all electric appliances, including refrigerator, television, and computer, have been put on lower deck of the bed, uplifted with cupboards and planks. Meals are simply served ahead of the bed. The toilet is just too small to extend an arm when taking shower. Surrounded by windows, the flat’s temperature rises in the late afternoon, especially during summer days, while her elder son, sleeping on upper deck, will feel hot when exhaust smoke and steam from kitchen flows through his bed. Without a washing machine, all clothes have to be washed by hand and there is of course no more space to hang them out except climbing up on the beds and then hanging outside the windows. Unlike a rooftop house, of course, no space can be

![An approximate floor plan of Mrs. B’s subdivided suite](image)

**Figure 6.3** An approximate floor plan of Mrs. B’s subdivided suite
extended for use given such fixed and isolated indoor setting. In short, the living environment is obviously far from ideal to Mrs. B and her family.

As a housewife and without a reason to escape from her home in a long-lasting manner, Mrs. B is trapped into such material space everyday much longer than do other family members. Most of the times she stays at home, and therefore residential space greatly influences her emotion and living experience. Competition over extremely finite space is a routine that the whole family has to confront with starting from the morning, while Mrs. B can shortly find relief when others are going to work or to school. In the weekend or after school the problem resumes since her younger sons hardly have any outdoor activity but simply stay at home, unless on Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday they are going to join free tutorial classes organized by certain community centres, which however last only for several hours. In the past she would take her sons to a playground (Maple Street Playground) below the tenement but now she no longer does so. Leisure time and consumption other than necessities are rare for Mrs. B that she seldom leaves SSP district and even go to, for instance, shopping mall within the district like Dragon Centre (West Kowloon Centre). Whereas within the tiny home, she was responsible for all housework: cooking, cleaning, washing, tidying up stuff, taking care of the needs of the family, etc. As a routine the only two reasons to walk on the streets are bringing children to school and buying food at Pei Ho Street market.

To Mrs. B, the space of such subdivided flat is a source of a sense of pressure and oppression:

‘...there is no more space but facing to four walls. It is a sense of oppression from the space within the four walls, in which several people walk back and forth...’

‘It is really pathetic. I’m very afraid of the time that they [her sons] don’t need to go to school because they stay at home for the whole day. I feel stressful as on one hand it is cramped and on the other they are very noisy.’

Comparing the living experiences in the Mainland with those of Hong Kong, she emphasized how big the difference between her expectations and the urban reality, even describing her living space as a ‘hell’, and revealing a ‘disenchantment’ of the myth of Hong Kong:

‘...If I could choose again, I wouldn’t come [to Hong Kong]...’
‘My husband sometimes blames me for helping him to apply to move to Hong Kong. At the time he didn’t want to come and said life in Hong Kong was tough... I didn’t expect living in Hong Kong would be like this. I thought... my livelihood would be improved and it’s easier to earn money to pay for the spending on education for my children with better education culture... I kind of regretted when I thought about this...

‘When I saw the place my husband was living... at the time It was like falling into the hell... never supposed to see a house which could be remarkably small like this.’

‘At least in the Mainland live is happy and carefree... without oppression like that in Hong Kong.’

Therefore, having trapped into an inadequate housing for a long time and lost a chance of decantation, her expectations on a residential space could remain simple and pragmatic: a sufficient and inexpensive space with ameliorated environment which is convenient for her children to receive education and to reduce travel distant and living costs without rushing for everyday life. She agreed that public housing within SSP district would be the best choice for her, regardless of the building age as household expenses and commodity prices in SSP could be relatively low, which is naturally the biggest reason why she prefers to live here. Specially, a visit to a public housing unit in Lai Kok Estate and an observation of residential mismatch between the size of a unit and the number of occupant rendered her a thought that residential space should be fairly distributed. Considering her residential status, it is natural that she holds such notion when this can be crucial to her family as a relatively large household:

‘I saw an elderly was living in unit around 600 to 700 sq. ft.—would it be too roomy? Her children have all moved out... and let her live alone. Should the government take back the under-occupied unit? And then rehouse her to a smaller unit and reallocate the large unit to households with more family members... Also, now public housings are being constructed in places like Cheung Sha Wan and it is not reasonable to have no large-size unit. I hope we can be offered a flat here. At least I am familiarized with the environment...’

To suggest that a space of 600 to 700 sq. ft. as ‘roomy’ for one person may be a gradually shrieking expectation of residential space after being ‘nurtured’ in such intensive urban space of Hong Kong to accept the reality, especially when comparing to living experiences in the Mainland China.
6.4.2.2 **Full tenement flats**

While some people are struggling for a decent living space, some are able to dwell without a durable exposure of spatial-material intensity, whether residential density or external, outdoor social interaction, even though such contrast of living conditions, from extremely tiny subdivided unit to self-contained, self-occupied flat, can be juxtaposed with great propinquity, and intuitionally homologous. The ability to be virtually immune from the influences of physical density within an urban reality of density is unevenly distributed, particularly when the path to an alternative housing is blocked with enhanced institutional control. The ownership of a property and the determination of its interior utility are an advantage of persons with certain social identity who can enjoy the opportunity created from a contextual socio-economic development to accumulate capital in a relatively longer time in order to purchase a property as a security of establishing a nuclear family—and in turn a (not necessarily achievable) security of adequate living space to be immune from overcrowding, which has been a norm or a life goal, propelled implicitly by developers, for the majority of Hong Kong people since land (re)development gained its privileged economic status and purchasing an independent flat, instead of a whole block of building, as an act of investment, became a common practice in the early post-war period (Tang, 2009:357-8; Fung, 2001). The following case about Mrs. C’s spatial practices and lived spaces reveals how an individual who paid effort on acquiring space attached a strong sense of exchange value and of protecting private property, and in turn experienced a disparate residential trajectory comparing to the first two cases. Yet the final session will discuss how such experiences were finally turned into a nightmare by a contradiction between URA-led redevelopment mechanism and property owner’s spatial meanings.

Mrs. C (aged 68) is a native Hongkonger and has been retired from running business after in the late August 2014 submitting to a durable yet actually one-sided negotiation about property acquisition between URA, Lands Department, and legal institution and her, provoked by an URA’s offer in a redevelopment scheme which was to her considered to be a severe underpayment. She described it as an ‘ordeal’ due to her inability in reversing the authorities’ decision, annoying her for six years.

Mrs. C and Mr. C’s spatial story is an example of a typical narrative of
Hongkongers during the decades of economic rising: working hard to save money, in the 1970s they were able to purchase property and then rooted at SSP, with a ground floor business premises and an upstairs cockloft in a tenement at Yen Chow Street, in which they ran a hardware store and dwelled at the cockloft. Later they further rented a part of a neighbour’s flat for their three children. In the early 1990s they experienced a redevelopment process by a private developer and acquisition was smoothly conducted. Then in 1992 Mr. and Mrs. C purchased the recent flats with a similar setting: ground floor premises of around 1,100 sq. ft. attached with a cockloft of about 700 sq. ft. at Tung Chau Street (see figure 6.4), continuing their hardware business in a space for both residential and commercial uses. Mrs. C mainly stayed at the store, in charge of any retail affair, being an assistance of Mr. C who spent relatively more time in the outside to search for business opportunity and to deliver or procure products.

The tenement on which their properties lie was constructed in the mid-1950s, virtually 60 years ago right before the renewed building ordinance of 1955 was in effect in 1956, resulting in a then prevailing 4-storey tenement with 18 units and rooftop houses (cockloft was not counted as an independent floor). A ground floor unit with a surface area equal to a whole floor of tenement is rarely found nowadays in subsequently built non-tenement properties when newly constructed flats are generally divided as many as possible for maximum economic efficiency.

In 2000, while Mr. C passed away, Mrs. C lost a motivation to operate the hardware business individually without an experienced prop to manage the business. She then turned the unit into a garment store and shortly rented out the unit for five years between 2004 and 2009, while URA launched a redevelopment project (Hai Tan Street/Kweilin Street and Pei Ho Street Development Scheme) in February 2006, and an offer of acquisition was given in 2008. Unsatisfied with URA’s treatment, Mrs. C refused the offer and resumed the garment store in a casual way, resisting any attempt of the dispossession of property. This case has even attracted attention from the mass media with the aid from a redevelopment concern group.

To Mrs. C, during the days in SSP, the concept of ‘density’, ‘overcrowding’ or a sense of living with density, whether commercially or residually, was basically out of her mind and had played a little role in her daily life, especially when she had shifted her properties to Tung Chau Street in the 1990s, at the time
her sons had already moved out, and had altered the utility of the premises to make a virtually liveable and very spacious environment not so much a commercial premises as an extension of her residential space. Tung Chau Street nowadays, located between the West Kowloon Corridor and newly developed public housing estates (Fu Cheong Estate) and the south-western edge of inner city region, is no longer a bustling street attracting pedestrian flow and industrial and commercial activities like the days when it was a praya of SSP pier. The roomy unit even attracted some members of the concern group, who supported Mrs. C’s resistance against the URA, to convert the space into a cultural gallery in early 2014, exhibiting artistic and photographic works on various aspects of SSP which were gradually eliminated owing to redevelopment.

With an approximately 700 square feet cockloft, which is located above the ground floor unit, yet not connected to each other that one had to access to it from a staircase aside, and is also a double of the surface area of the rooftop house of A’s family and even several times that of Mrs. B’s subdivided suite, the residential space of Mrs. C, despite a relatively low headroom of 2.03 m, totally made no trouble to her with self-contained setting: basic furniture, electric appliances and facilities, especially during the days she was living alone. However, since she started to run a garment store, she did not stay at the cockloft all the time but spend most of the time in the 1,100-square-feet premises during business hours, especially when during the course of negotiation period she had to keep on operating the premise to prevent from bailiff’s action of repossession. The front side of the store was set up with shelves, clothes-stands and racks for hanging commodities, which did not take up a lot of space, while the rear side acted like on one hand a living room in which tables, chairs and more shelves were placed, becoming a space for gathering and chatting with her friends, neighbours, or even doing concern group meetings; and on the other a kitchen with cookware and refrigerator, where Mrs. C could prepare meals. Such spatial settings and spatial practices would become rare once tenement-style buildings were eradicated from SSP under redevelopment process.

Comparing to the cases of A’s family in which Mrs. A regarded her residential space merely as a temporary dwelling as she knew it was very likely to be demolished and not owned permanently; and to the case of Mrs. B in which she would not cherish the living space making troubles to her every day, Mrs. C, on
the contrary, in the interviews repeatedly showed a much stronger sense in protecting and emphasizing on the significance of her private properties—as well as the underlying exchange value attached to the spaces—and she thought that her spaces, representing a fruit of long-lasting hardworking throughout most of her life, should remained intact and be owned immutably, unless totally equivalent conditions could be offered in exchange of her spaces, i.e. ‘a house for a house, a premises for a premises’. This also explains why she resisted intensely to URA’s offer and actions, which she described as a ‘robbery’ as the acquisition price was no more than half of the market value, an estimation made by a surveyor company employed by her, leading to a deadlock for six years, even if she suffered from emotional instability and torment in the course of a so-called ‘negotiation’, revealed even during the interviews. This can be regarded a mental trap of space which has not resulted from a physical plight of corporeality but a condition when different conceived spaces had heavily intervened and disturbed a physical space and finally ignited an internal contradiction to compete for either a continuation of spatial stagnancy or an evolvement of higher material density.
Figure 6.4  A floor plan of Mrs. C’s ground floor unit and upstairs cockloft (Source: provided by Mrs. C)
Chapter 6   Living with(out) Density

Figure 6.5
The interior settings of Mrs. C ground floor unit (upper six) and cockloft (lower six)
(Source: author)
6.4.3 Non-tenement Private Property

Owning a private property in some cases does not mean to be essentially immune from the overcharging of residential density. Mr. D is a native forty year-old artist, as a freelancer working at home. His family had moved several times since he was young, from tenements in Mong Kok and Tai Kok Tsui, to public housing units in Tuen Mun, Pak Tin Estate and Nam Cheong Estate (due to rebuilding of Pak Tin Estate). When he began his career, he left the public housing unit and had moved alone to Tai Wai and a tenement in Wan Chai, in which he even experienced living in a partitioned room. In the past six years he has returned to SSP and been living in a flat, with a size slightly more than 200 sq. ft., of a private residential block at Hai Tan Street, in the 1990s purchased by his parents, to whom Mr. D described as grassroots, who could only afford to buy a flat in relatively lower price at the time. While his siblings have got married and lived independently, his parents chose to stay at Nam Cheong Estate, with a relatively larger flat, and left the unit to Mr. D, who is now living alone. He had ever been an instructor at a tertiary education institute but finally he gave up the well-paid job and turned himself into a freelance worker, albeit with unstable and much lower wage, resulting in a tight budget for daily spending and non-essential consumption, yet being free to do whatever he liked.

His flat was built in early 1990s, as a product of small-scale redevelopment from a tenement occupying only tiny land lot. It is a typical example of an increased number of flat at the expense of its size: with 15 residential floors in just a small site, the building had to be designed as a slender tower with two-storey podium, while totally 63 units are crammed into it and there are four units per floor. One could imagine how small a unit could be as a result.

Being a freelancer and an artist his flat functions in two ways: as a dwelling and a studio simultaneously, although he suggested that such act was not a normal and ideal practice—when working and living were put in the same space sometimes without a period of relief from a sense of oppression and crowdedness—and he admitted that the flat was not so much a living space as a working space. In reality the flat looks more like a store room: all rooms except the toilet has been placed with stuff such as data books and tools for working, which has been accumulated for long and gradually stacked to almost reach the ceiling, leaving only a little ‘path’ in the living room for moving back and forth.
and no space for more than two people to sit. Given the nature of his work relying mainly on hand drawing, a desk is sufficient to do some simple single works, but without space he could never engage in a large-scale project involving a team of artists when working apart would not be possible, leading to a heavy limit on job types and opportunities. He can by no means sleep on a bed but simply place a mattress on floor and lift it up against the wall after use. External space, such as rooftop, becomes crucial to be employed to temporarily put his excessive things. Being asked about why he did not rent a unit for studio to make a change, the answer appeared to be simple: financial burden. Favouring to live and work at SSP, he recalled an experience of finding a tenement unit through real estate agency and was informed that a subdivided room at eighth floor with only 80 sq. ft. was worth of 4,000 HKD per month, what made him think it was ‘crazy’ and this kind of setting and mentality for maximum profit ‘inhuman’, ‘impersonalized’. The congested space has nurtured him with a desire of leaving the flat after several hours of working, whether on the rooftop or streets, to simply wander around SSP or to eat out, etc.

Being financially incapable for an independent working space or even a new decent living space, though eager to it, he pointed out this ‘space of abnormality’, a combination of studio and dwelling while the former overwhelms virtually the entire space, has similarly become a trap of residential spatial practices, and generated negative emotions:

*It is tough and sometimes you couldn’t even work...working and living environment should be separated. When you had not enough space and were living alone, you would have depression, and feel down in the dumps...or when you finished your work and just turned around and slept on the floor; this kind of live wasn’t normal...it wasn’t good, and heavily influenced my emotion and I had to adjust it gradually.*

Comparing to his one year experience of living in a tiny subdivided room with strangers in Wan Chai, his recent dwelling however gave him a sense of security as he at least knew his neighbours and familiarized with surrounding space, without being afraid of any crime. Residing in a subdivided room gave him a feeling of being a ‘visitor’ that he would never live there for long or even forever. Nevertheless, there is a true reason, as a compromise, to have him voluntarily stay at SSP, despite the annoying inconveniences of residential density: a retreat from home space to a vital street life for consumption and rich social contacts as
another manifestation of density characterizing SSP:

‘I didn’t like Sham Shui Po in the past so I moved out. I felt that Sham Shui Po was a mess, ugly, old, and dilapidate... I still resisted it when I initially returned here... Now I really go down to the streets and greet to anyone—it is really admirable. You will feel happy to greet the people you meet every day, even though we are not familiarized with each other... Such social exchange cannot be found in a shopping mall.’

‘You can settle what you need in daily life by simply going downstairs. This is admirable and a preciousness of a community. The shops are very close to you, and you know the shopkeepers. Sometimes they even visit your home. This is simply what a human life should be.’

‘I would still prefer living around if I had to move, and I think I would not leave Sham Shui Po. Because I engage in creative work, I think this place can easily inspire me. Moreover, this place is very vigorous. You would feel less negatively if you found the people energetic...’

However, this is never a true solution of his residential condition, which is insurmountable if there is no alternative in freely transforming exterior space as an extension of interior space—in other words, street life to him is transient and merely a temporary means.

6.4.4 Remark

To these interviewees, there are again three key ‘layers’ of representations of space initially attributed to the materiality of SSP and their consequential spaces, horizontally produced through land distribution and management mechanism and vertically produced through buildings ordinance and formal density controls as rational fragmentation of land and living space into tidily, compactly packed blocks and units. Assisted by capitalist process imposing exchange value and social identities on each independent unit of space, no matter what kinds of qualitative conditions they possess, residential spaces have not only generated emotional and mental responses, whether positive or negative, but also acquired the conditions of being different kinds of ‘traps’ and ‘mismatches’.

To Mrs. A and Mrs. B, on one hand SSP possesses historical and locational advantages for supporting convenient access to and relatively low spending on necessities caused them a strong will to stay at SSP, while has been no better choice but indecent residential space which will be gradually destabilized owing to the future intervention of urban renewal mechanism, without satisfaction of
their demands on secured space or an escape from a sense of oppression. On the other hand there has been a long-lasting tolerance of the existence of subdivided unit and rooftop house and their markets, together with the decaying physical structures, finally leading to a transitional period towards a deferred renewal and in turn a cessation of the influences from partially outdated conceived spaces. The spaces are retrieved and real estate development process is re-launched, subject to a relieve of all physical dimensions conferred by OZP, subordinated plans, zoning, and plot ratio control, and meanwhile exhausting final potential of capital accumulation by flat acquisitions and subdivision. There is also prohibitive exchange value for the consequential spaces and the allocation mechanism of public housing unit, emphasizing on household assets and other eligibility, yet has failed to keep pace with actual social needs. More importantly, the tilted dependence on conceived space in allocating and producing spatial resource tends to result in a disregard of lived aspects of space and one’s authentic practices of everyday life, especially when both Mrs. A and Mrs. B, for instance, comply unwittingly or reluctantly with the ‘rules of game’, assimilating to their lived space a sense that a residential space, regardless of occupancy density and needs, equals to merely a disproportional exchange value responding simply to a fluctuating market, without seeking for alternative. In these senses spatial trap and mismatch have been at work to create their predicament: unresponded demand on space and unsurmountable spatial constraints on body and everyday life.

In the case of Mr. D, though living and working in a tiny flat was in the first place revealed as a personal choice and he was originally more flexible to choose his own dwelling than Mrs. A and Mrs. B did, ‘personal choice’ would always be a justification of the existence of such kind of flat generated in a way people match up to such space rather than the opposite, as long as there is demand in housing market. Again, this is the way how conceived spaces manage to create spaces in virtually out-of-context manner rendering a difficulty or even a conflict in coordinating everyday life with residential space. Of course, the slender tower building that Mr. D has been living is obviously a product of distant past, not in terms of the age of building but particularly the fragmentation of land into groups of small blocks more than a century ago. The reproduction of residential space is then confined by such physical and institutional stagnancy but the consequences of such space are imposed on its user instead of the producers. Without a power of
capital to acquire a large site, a residential building still revealed itself as being trapped in an abnormality originated from the conceived spaces: it remains the physical traits of its preceding tenement in nature, yet meanwhile being subdivided with even more units, resulting in Mr. D’s living experience—as a repercussion of multiple traps in effect throughout the history of SSP.

Capitalist process, highly adaptive to the evolvement of conceived spaces can operate smoothly with spatial mismatches between institutional establishments and lived space or only through these mismatches and spatial contradictions from a disregard of lived aspect of socio-spatial processes of SSP as a whole, its maximum interest is possible.

In short, spatial contradictions arise when the inertia of conceived spaces cannot be keep pace with social changes, and solution hinges on the strength of resistance against such conflict—which had ever happened and been widespread in SSP through a violation of laws like squatting, illegal encroachment construction and other ‘abnormal’ production of residential space. However, the following discussion reveals a diminishing of such power of resistance through transforming residential-exterior spatial relations into another trap, which is rigid and not transgressive.

6.5 Density as Everyday Street Life:

From Transient Encounters to Enhanced Spatial Trap

As shown in those cases, inhabitants would not confine themselves at their dwelling all the time, no matter how durable they can be. There would however be a relief of residential density, if any, by turning themselves towards exterior spaces and any specific space related to their daily spatial practices. Within core study area, however, given the physical setting of SSP, streets are highly probable to produce the most commonly shared lived spaces and spatial practices over different time periods, since on one hand they are an essential link to residential spaces or external transport nodes and networks for everyday circulation, and on the other they are a dominant form of physical space when open space, for leisure use and gathering of residents, is almost absent. Therefore, besides the nature and functions of density on the street spaces orienting individuals’ spatial practices, there are crucial questions of how their strategies of averting from residential density operate when being out of scheduled activities and its associated spaces (it
can be also on the street), such as attending school and working, and of how durable they can be. They hinge on the abilities and willingness of individuals, especially for those whose spatial reach is primarily confined only within SSP, as in the cases of Mrs. B. and Mr. D, who both suffered from a sense of oppression residentially while the former had been relatively less motivated to leave home than did the latter.

The relation between residential density and street density, from the perspective of inhabitants in the case of SSP, should be as follows: retreating to exterior spaces is a spatial strategy of averting from residential density, if any, and also a scheduled spatial practices of everyday life, while such temporally varying and collective acts create street density as dynamic and, more importantly, transient encounters among pedestrian clusters, interacting with functionally organized material spaces, which are mainly commercial, if not without competitions for space. The degree of intensity relies on temporal changes and matching between the aims of pedestrians and the functions provided by the very streets. However, residential space must be the final destination of daily circulation virtually without exception, given a relatively stringent spatial control over its utilities and against any spatial resistance of alternative forms of dwelling. The clues are to be revealed from the interviewees’ everyday life outside their residential spaces—with various aims, abilities, and considerations towards the street space. The cases of Mrs. A and Mr. D are applied in the following discussion.

6.5.1 Cases

Mrs. A has a full-time job as a worker for five to six days a week, from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. every day, in a primary school at Tai Kok Tsui which is within walking distant from her home. Meanwhile she also needs to share housework with Mr. A, who has to help to look after the children and buy food in turn if out of work, while Mrs. A can return home to prepare meal in the lunch break and after duty. Mrs. A is going to buy food for a whole week at and around Pei Ho Street market in the weekend morning or afternoon, while in the weekend afternoon Mrs. A may also take her children to Dragon Centre for leisure and consumption for two hours, from around 2 p.m. to 4 p.m., or very infrequently walk to the parks or visit others’ home as far as Cheung Sha Wan or Shek Kip Mei. For the rest of the time, Mrs. A
stays at home to look after her children and to do housework. Her expenditure focuses mostly on daily necessities and thus certain commercial-led streets, such as Apliu Street, are distanced away from her. Her simple street life over the space indicates her attitude towards the street as highly functionalized space, as she expressed explicitly that, when being asked if she would deliberately simply wander around the streets, she would not do so for the reasons that she was always in a hurry to walk between her home and workplace to take care of her children or she would only go to predetermined places for clear aims without wasting time to find her way. This can be regarded as a short-term resource-oriented, virtually isolated spatial practice over the streets. There were several major roads that she would walk through as daily or weekly routine: Tung Chau Street for work, Yen Chow Street, Ki Lung Street, Kweilin Street and Pei Ho Street for groceries. Recalling to her way to the targeted places, Mrs. A described the more or less chaotic and spatially competitive scenes over the streets, necessitating another strategy of selective routes:

'(In Tung Chau Street) People place [their products like] vegetables all over the street. [The street is] wet and dirty. I would prefer to walk over the vehicle roads which were dangerous...No one managed this group of people who stacked their goods over the road...one third of the whole street, including the vehicle road is occupied by them.'

'(The way to market and shopping mall) It is relatively calm in the morning, but since around 2 p.m. there comes many activities like recycling of electric appliances; some shops like repair store start running, and intensely packed [vendors]... also come out. Pedestrian roads are just crammed with people. For many times therefore we had to walk on the vehicle roads...along [the cars] parked aside...I think it is very dangerous [to her daughters]...If I was bringing my daughters along, I would not walk to this way as relatively more cars were going through this way; this way had relatively fewer vehicles and therefore I took my daughters along this road.'

Since Mrs. A had a typical rhythm of everyday life, i.e. a circulation from working to consumptions on street to dwelling, and a satisfactory living space, though it must not last long due to urban renewal, temporally short and simple street activities would not create a problem to her.

On the contrary, Mr. D values the street life and wills to spend more time on the streets and to establish strong social contact with stores and on-street workers, as a means of relieving the pressure derived from his working-dwelling space. With unscheduled work hour and irregular daily routine, he flees to the streets
after every several hours of work, eating out, wandering around, purchasing groceries and exchanging words with shopkeepers, owners. Favouring recent mode of street-store relation of being convenient for consumption, he thought that a street should be a subsidiary and functional space for its residents:

‘As for daily life, I prefer Lai Chi Kok Road, as I think this street is very ‘magical’ that it can satisfy all your needs and give all you want. But you can see it is changing, and you know in the coming future the street as a mode of serving community will be lost... We should think if that street can help or is serving people living there, as I can feel that the streets are not for the residents but for the travellers... I think a street should serve the residents’

This similarly reveals a lived space that the primary function of street space is still for acquiring resources and short-term social interaction and exchange. On the other hand, being less temporally constrained and regularized than Mrs. A is, his spatial strategy against street density is relatively more flexible. He first broadly categorizes two groups of street with different patterns of pedestrian flow and economic features: one located around MTR station as a bustling, main consumer centre as well as dry and wet market serving a diverse source of residents, both local residents and outsiders, and another one around his home at Hai Tai Street, which is calm, not pedestrian intensive, and prone to be redeveloped and in where commercial and vendor activities target more at the locals. He knows the patterns of the fluctuating flow of density and then he can go to the latter in the morning for groceries and to the former in the evening for non-necessity consumption or eating out. Therefore he suggested that density on the streets was not a big issue but how to interact with people in such an environment—though to him, again, fleeing away from density, both of the street and of his home, makes no resolution to his residential predicament, let alone a sense of regarding street as an extension of residential space, which is in reality impossible to him.

6.5.2 Remark

These two cases further reveal the significances of spatial trap. While the dichotomy and separation of residential space and exterior space becomes distinct, the density of dwelling is relatively difficult to be surmounted without appropriate spatial strategy temporally durable and effective to enhance usable space. No matter how strong and durable their ability or will to escape from residential density or how severe such density is, appealing to exterior streets dominated by
mainly commerce-led space for the short-termed channel and concentration of people and resource is no longer a realm for collectively extending and producing personal dwelling spaces.

In addition, although in comparison their differentiated socio-economic features have led to disparate rationales in imagining the meaning of street space on them, they in turn similarly demand for other spatial practices and strategies, such as bypassing density or a space with certain physical conditions, instead of creating space out of the ‘rules’. It is a ‘zigzag’-like spatial practice of everyday life over the very spaces, a ceaseless back-and-forth movement between interior and exterior space without a transgression—residential density is no longer a publicly visible phenomenon as resistance. For those who have weak ability of escaping from residential density with small spatial reach and meanwhile have been suffering from residential density, such trap is even more influential on themselves.

Thus, the virtual absence of alternative and even a sense of pursuing alternative out of institutional control on housing allocation, ironically, can be further underpinned by the very existing of their own (dense) residential space as private property or at least a shelter rendering an abandonment of it and appealing to extreme form of dwelling, such as street sleeping at the ‘cracks’ of public space, even out of the street, disadvantageous—all these notions again point to final meaning of ‘trap’—the strengthened physical and abstract limitations on the spatial practices in exterior space which reflexively confine, if not totally eliminate, flexibility in extending, changing or modifying residential space.

6.6 Towards a Future High Density Development: Urban Renewal and Spatial Contradictions

If residential spaces are a stagnant extension of the conceived spaces from the past, and street densities indicate the present and everyday practices of man-space relation, then urban renewal directs towards the future high density development as a re-imposition of renewed conceived spaces offering a potential of maximum material expansion, and generating new composition of social-economic identities, qualitative and quantitative features of the construction and interior space. Such transformations indicate and presuppose intangibly a spatial contradiction of lived space—whether a sense of vital living space or only
a mentality led by exchange value—and multivariate conceived spaces in repossessing the space: not only the renewed spatial abstractions but also a revival of the stagnant ones, which were once inactivated, as a deferral ‘counterattack’ to spatial resistance such as illegal construction. The cases of A’s family and Mrs. C illustrate such processes of spatial reproduction and conflicts.

6.6.1 Dislocation as Spatial Mismatch

URA’s rehousing and acquisition processes are only on the basis of social identities and the attached conceived spaces of a particular ‘property’. Regardless of the need of space, ineligibilities only result in dislocation. In the case of A’s family, a rooftop house is a de facto property which can be traded through a law firm or through an oral or simple written contract, yet without formal recognition by a registration though the Land Registry, and can also be billed for government services and taxing, though their existences, labelled as illegal construction work, have been tolerated for several decades without a protection of statutory property right. The past and the recent owners of the whole rooftop long preserved but did not exercise their right to repossess the rooftop until in 2011 a real estate agency conducted acquisition of properties and the owner issued for several times orders of bailiff to expel A’s family which was finally executed in the early 2013, as a ‘revenge’ of the conceived space against the products of resistance towards the then buildings ordinance. While the household could submit neither a proof of ownership of the rooftop nor that of the house, they failed in a lawsuit raised by the owner and were on the verge of being homeless but finally they could settle down temporarily due to the mediation of SoCO and eventually the intervention of URA.

However, Mrs. A’s lived space of staying at SSP for a convenient and ‘grassroots-friendly’ living environment, and of residing indefinitely in her rooftop house have been endangered by and conflictual to URA’s policy of compensation as A’s family has no eligibility for immediate rehousing to public housing but can recently only apply for an ex-gratia urgent financial assistance from URA. Even if a public housing unit could be offered, rehousing in situ has been virtually impossible provided a shortage of public housing unit and a lack of further development potential for public housing block adjacent to SSP. It will eventually be a dilemma of either leaving SSP or re-enter to the market of
subdivided unit in SSP with a risk of residential instability due to possible interference of redevelopment.

Her lived spaces were not considered to be relevant to and overwhelmed by the redevelopment mechanism which complies only partially with all planning knowledge and legal density control. The operation of private property and land market is also a disregard of a completeness of the complicated nexus of everyday spatial practices and all personal expectations on the spatio-temporalities of SSP: the redevelopment scheme has been a successfully launched ‘demand-led’ project, implying that ‘owners representing more than 80 percent of the undivided shares per lot…have signed agreements to sell their properties to URA’ (URA, 2013c). It has favoured merely property owners’ lived space which could be inconsistent with URA’s ‘rules of game’: the urban redevelopment process is a de facto real estate development and URA is a developer, as admitted by its incumbent chairman, Victor So Hing-woh (Apple Daily, 2013-6-20). The extreme and polarized forms of interior residential space and density—with 152 units and 13 rooftop houses housing however 254 households and 530 people—will then be eliminated, as suggested by URA that ‘[i]n compliance with the “Residential (Group A) 6” zoning, the proposed development will comprise a residential building and a retail podium’ and ‘provide about 190 small to medium sized residential units’ (URA, 2013a; 2013b). This, of course, is also a displacement of social underclass and a direct reduction of the stock of subdivided unit in SSP when the original space will be consequentially turned into prohibitive one, deepening the spatial mismatch.

### 6.6.2 Historical Disconnection and Spatial Default

Redevelopment then simply reduces, resets the space to be a commodity again for personal selection of physical occupation which is a spatial default and a historical disconnection to SSP and to the original social nexus, wiping out the possibility of further development of lived space. The conflictual denial from URA upon Mrs. C’s request for appropriate compensation in exchange of her properties unfolds a ubiquitous lived space that a space must be treated ‘objectively’ in accordance with exchange value when it has been imposed on the very space, and Mrs. C’s ability in averting from material density will be finally transferred to URA in producing other forms of physical space as a neutralized
and more massive commodity. There has recently been more available information on the urban renewal project, in which Mrs. C involved, regarding a real estate development plan and its rationales, demonstrating in details how disconnection and default will be generated in the future through an overwhelming process of re-imposing an abstractly purified physical space, which is devoid of social-lived spaces yet superficially consuming out-of-context cultural symbols under the capitalist-planning representations. Those two phenomena are hinged on the planning and decision-making processes under URA and TPB (ibid.; TPB & URA, 2009).

According to URA’s planning application and the minute of the Metro Planning Committee of TPB (ibid.), the redevelopment project, Hai Tan Street/Kweilin Street and Pei Ho Street Development Scheme, is the largest project in Sham Shui Po-Cheung Sha Wan region in terms of its total site area (7,440 m²/ around 80,000 sq. ft.) and net site area (6,620 m²/ around 71,257 sq. ft., for plot ratio calculation), which is zoned as a CDA under the Development Scheme Plan of the project, comprising of three non-conterminous sites (labelled as ‘A’, ‘B’, and ‘C’). Five composite residential-podium buildings, with 34 to 36 storeys plus basement, 845 flats in total, and a six-storey non-domestic commercial building have been planned. The GFA of domestic use space is 49,650 m² with a plot ratio of 7.5 and of non-domestic use space is 7,190 m² with a plot ratio of 1.09, in which 4,990 m² was for commercial use, conforming to what Cheung Sha Wan OZP stipulates. Specially there will be a space of 1,500 m² at site C for ‘at-grade and uncovered’ public open space adjacent to Pei Ho Street, by which URA claimed to alleviate the scanty of public space in the area (TPB, 2009:8). However, the public open space, supposed to be integrated into the street space, would be privately owned and managed by URA and its agency, indicating its ‘pseudo-publicness’ with a limited daily access time.

The justifications of such development and architectural design are included in the executive summary of URA’s application report, though its massiveness and spatial default—the elimination and reproduction of all spatial elements except the ‘upgraded’ conceived spaces—is taken for granted without doubt as early as the day when the redevelopment project has been approved to be commenced. To prettify the redevelopment, they intended or pretended to embed (disappeared) cultural elements in the space:
‘A staggered building form has been adopted for the towers facing the West Kowloon Corridor. Such layout mirrors the staggered or stepped appearance of many of the existing tenement buildings in this part of Sham Shui Po. In additional to be visually and culturally distinct, the layout also has a practical application as it provides a degree of noise protection for the floors above…Both Sites B and C do not have the traditional podium of 100% site coverage. Site C has an internal street that echoes the existing local street pattern. It also re-creates the traditional ground level retail/shopping streetscape which is common in Sham Shui Po.’

‘The local cultural and heritage context has been taken into consideration in the development process of the scheme. The historical presence of the pier at Tung Chau Street has been recognized in the future design of the public open space. The setting of the adjacent jade market and wet market with cultural significance will be further strengthened in the current scheme.’ (TPB & URA, 2009)

Such abstract representation or simulation of the lost social-cultural features, if they had really ever existed, ironically erased by past development, is hardly a lived space related to future residents or even to most of the original residents of the demolished spaces. URA did not consider a possible reconfiguration of the spatio-temporalities with the needy who had together produced (partially) the original social space of SSP, but concealed the nature of urban renewal as virtually a selective, material-led real estate development regardless of historicity-sociality, by a universally fitted rhetoric emphasizing on the conditions of the physical setting of construction, which can be applicable to thousands of them but has never been truly concretized in all applicable situations:

‘There is pressing need for the redevelopment of the area. All the buildings in the sites were built in the 1940s and 1950s, and most of the buildings are in poor or deteriorating condition, and the absence of owners committee in any of the buildings making rehabilitation of the buildings not feasible. The environmental conditions in the sites were poor and exacerbated by illegal rooftop structures; other unauthorized building works; and the ground floor activities of car repair and metal workshops that frequently encroached onto the pavements. The buildings facing onto the West Kowloon Corridor were also significantly affected by severe traffic noise.’ (ibid.)

This so-called ‘pressing need’, of course, is not pressing to URA at all. Then, the eliminated sociality, lived spaces and spatial practices are to be replaced and assumed for these anonymous, fictional groups of people:

‘The implementation of this proposed comprehensive redevelopment project…will help revitalize the local community. Direct benefits to the community will be the public open space, G/IC facilities catering to the elderly and the young, off-street parking and servicing provision and market
With the aid of TPB whose deliberation on the application does not go beyond the abovementioned issues and their technical concretization, new material spaces are expected to be continuously produced, and they rewrite the social space of SSP as well as the processes and significances of urban density.

In sum, traps, default and disconnection, and mismatches are all temporally and spatially related. The physical spaces have long been intervened by abstract spatial representations favouring only a part of the urban processes, and are able to perpetuate, underpin themselves through the default of physical space, the reconfiguration of socio-spatial relations, and the re-imposition of spatial abstractions to produce new form of urban intensity, rendering the urban space rigid in preventing alternative spatial practices with other formulations of urban intensity. Therefore, the lived spaces can be either compliant or contradictory with such processes and their consequential spaces, while the latter implies the spatial traps and mismatches between individuals, their expectations of everyday life, and the physical spaces, at different levels.

6.7 Summary

This final chapter elaborates how individuals’ everyday life and spatial meanings in the spaces of density and non-density are (re)produced through intrinsically complicated processes, relationally stretching across the past (physical settings and institutions established from the past but still influential on each person until recently), the present (the practices of everyday life through residential space and exterior space under institutional controls), and the future (the mechanism of reproducing physical spaces and in turn socio-spatial significances attached on the very space). In such intensive level of urban reality, diverse personal identities and features interact with general socio-spatial processes, resulting in distinct spatial (mis)matching and spatio-temporal patterns of everyday practices: they have been revealed as the differentiation of personal abilities and willingness in (not) experiencing density, and also as contradictions (e.g. an unacceptable deprivation of private property and the negligence of any demand for space and change), compromise (e.g. a shrieking expectation on residential improvement), and/or compliance (e.g. an absence of a sense of
resistance by producing new space and resource-oriented daily life) produced through the dialectical interaction of spatial practices, the representations of space, and the spaces of representation. Space as a result unfolds a feature of trapping both corporeality and spatial abstractions at different geographical levels, with the stagnancy and disproportion of the need of space producers and users. In terms of street space, it underpins such traps due to its nature of highly manipulated man-material relations in preventing undesirable spatial practices except a strategic use of space. The urban redevelopment mechanism reconfigures urban density through a revival and a re-imposition of spatial representations, wiping out all original elements of every individual’s spatio-temporalities and capacities by default and disconnection. The complexity of historical-geographical processes and relations enmeshed with every individual’s experiences has embodied SSP as a unique high density social space.
Chapter 7
Conclusion

7.1 Summary of Major Arguments

This research is a critical urban study on the nature of Sham Shui Po’s high density development, inspired by Henri Lefebvre’s theory of the ‘production of space’. It begins with a critique of the literature on urban density in Hong Kong published from the 1960s to the 2010s. They embraced a wide range of theme and subject, and generally shared identical theoretical foundation in interpreting the nature of ‘density’ in ‘absolute space’ approach, by which it was defined either as physical or perceived-psychological one. While not dismissing their contributions in understanding certain density issues, their research methodologies mostly fell short in revealing the nature of the urban as a totality of spatiality, temporality, and sociality, and the intrinsically complicated processes and man-space relations in generating urban density. The consequential reductionist findings were then devoid of many socio-political implications and significances or even depreciated urban density to be a physical background, material conditions, and unrelated events to be employed in theoretical testing, rather than regarded as diverse socio-spatialities and processes. The studies on SSP, though informative, are also found wanting in terms of research theme and approach, suffering similar problems.

These issues then point towards an alternative analytic framework in investigating urban density—to consider it as multiple intrinsically related social spaces. It led to an elucidation on the ontology of the urban as a kind of social space, drawn on several geographers’ notions, that it is constituted by spatiality, temporality, as well as social processes and relations. They are dialectically and relationally connected, and thus mutually alter each other throughout the time. Individuals find themselves enmeshed in diverse spatio-temporalities, which can be conflictual, contradictory, and contested for spatial resources, invoking transformations of the urban. Based on these theoretical assumptions, the Lefebvrian theory extends the meaning of spatiality that social space is consisted of three dialectic elements, i.e. the spatial practices (perceived spaces) as the routines of spatial activities, the representations of space (conceived spaces) as
spatial abstractions controlling the objective production of space, and the spaces of representation (lived spaces) as subjective symbolic significances attached on spaces. The conceived spaces through the power of authorities technically and mechanically manipulate physical spaces and lived space, while the lived space may empower resistance against the former or simply submit to such top-down imposition, depending on how strong the conceived space can be to oppress such resistance. Their ‘battles’ are consequentially manifested as the spatial practices of individuals and their collective everyday life, and they together form the social space of SSP as high density urban space, focusing on residential and street-commercial spaces, stretching over history and moving towards future alterations.

To unfold these socio-spatial relations and implications, this study has first investigated the nature of the conceived spaces of density imposed on Hong Kong and SSP in forms of formal and implicit control. It suggests that on one hand the spatial representations of density in producing urban fabric comprise and operate through a collaboration of planning knowledge, capitalist processes and abstract values, and legal and administrative means; on the other hand they are also accompanied with indirect controls of urban intensities by capitalist land management mechanisms, the legal manipulation of spatial practices and spatial utilities in both interior and exterior living spaces, and an urban redevelopment mechanism integrating those abstractions to underpin their capacity in commanding the production of physical space, especially residential one. Tracing back their historical trajectory of development, it is found that the spatial representations have long been immersed in a collaborative relation with capitalist processes, especially land and real estate developments, to reconcile the interests of different social groups on spatial productions, by evolving themselves from a simple limitation of the dimensions of material space to a series of flexible standard, supported by increasingly technical, diverse, and sophisticated institutional establishments, including buildings ordinances, density zoning, OZPs and planning reviews, etc. These conceived spaces reveal a partiality and inability to manifest urban totality to consider all dimensions of urban density, not only in terms of physical settings but also of complicated nexus of everyday spatial practices at both local and individual level. Such feature of conceived spaces acts as a source of spatial contradictions.
It is argued that the interactions with conceived spaces finally bring five implications contributing to the (re)production of the high density socio-spatialities of SSP. First, spaces are fragmented physically and functionally, and everyday life is then placed in each of the clearly separated spaces with gradually simplified and disciplined spatial practices. Second, the enhanced conceived spaces imposed on a physical space are stagnant for a certain time-span yet are also oriented towards future redevelopments. Such impositions have undermined collective spatial resistance driven by lived spaces in pursuing alternative spatial utilities. Third, the socio-spatialities of SSP have acquired a feature of ‘traps’: individuals can be trapped by their own material spaces for everyday life, in varying degrees depending on their socio-economic features, and by the ‘rules’ under which spatial practices are manifested over the very spaces; while physical spaces and conceived spaces mutually trap each other, further constraining the flexibility of spatial utilities and practices, and deepening the functional fragmentation between, for instance, residential spaces and exterior spaces. Fourth, to perpetuate high density spatial development, the processes of spatial abstractions reproduce material spaces by default and disconnection: erasing, re-imposing, and reconfiguring socio-spatiality regardless of all originally attached social-historical elements. Finally, individuals with shrieking ability of resistance, confront with spatial mismatches when their lived spaces cannot be reconciled with the abovementioned processes, resulting in dispossession or insurmountable experience of high density spaces.

Then, on the basis of these implications, the analysis has exhibited, firstly from a perspective of the general history of SSP’s social-physicality, how land, housing, and street-commercial spaces and respective spatial practices evolve through time to construct urban intensity. SSP has gone through radical colonial intervention of land development mechanism converting SSP’s traditional settlements into modern capitalist urbanity. By planning practices of mechanically subdividing and allocating land and producing new land through reclamation, it has become narrowly linked to real estate development to confine other possibilities of spatial practices, and through such continuously skewed development, SSP is now trapped physically due to a continuous exhaustion of space by, for instance, contrast socio-spatiality like public housings. In terms of housing development, on one hand private properties and later public housings
have gained it enhanced massiveness and monopolized status in occupying space while SSP’s socio-economic context, spatial stagnancy and the capitalist processes of spatial renewal have together supported the practice of dwelling subdivision; on the other hand, such ceaseless physical (re)development and reinforced spatial management helped to wipe out the alternatives of dwelling, as the resistance of lived spaces, like squatter settlement and street sleeping. The distribution and the residential experience of density have then become physically and institutionally rigid. It is also suggested that street-commercial spaces represent another form of urban density in SSP as a relatively more dynamic realm of everyday practices and a contrast of residential spaces. Dominated by the conceived spaces in manipulating and confining spatial practices, such as hawker control and pedestrianization, to comply with pro-commercial logic, propped by fast-flowing, target-oriented activities with transient encounters and a mentality of discouraging enduring spatial encroachment, underpinning the dichotomy between residential-interior spaces and street-commercial spaces. Such development of SSP has brought out socially and physically fragmented spaces, and density has been highly related to social identities inflexibly trapping individuals to their own spaces of everyday life.

The study finally focused on socio-spatial interactions between the conceived spaces, spatial practice, and lived spaces under urban density at individual level and throughout SSP’s whole historical time-span from its colonial past to the future. These spatial elements are subject to more varieties such as personal socio-economic features and experiences, influencing their abilities and strategies in escaping from, or the duration of exposing to, density of all kinds, and determining their symbolic linkage to spaces through the impositions of values or subjective perceptions. Four case studies from semi-structured interviews revealed that residential experiences and subsidiary physical spaces in SSP could be found trapped in such rigidly and historically produced high density spaces and processes and also contradictory to individuals’ lived spaces, especially in terms of securing personal space for decent, convenient, and adequate living without being subject to extreme occupancy density. These unresponded lived spaces result in spatial mismatches hardly alleviated with a dissipated possibility of collective resistance. Street-commercial spaces can act as merely a strategic space for daily circulations, and a transient withdrawal of residential density which has
been hardly a permanent solution if residents could only comply or compromise with recent spatial orders. The spatial-temporal default and disconnection through urban renewal will simply physically shift and continue residential density by dislocating inhabitants, while new form of physical density is produced at the expense of one’s ability in averting undesirable density, dispossessed through overwhelming conceived spaces. The study therefore unfolds how traps, default and disconnection, and mismatches are spatially and temporally linked and manifested.

7.2 Implications

7.2.1 Density as Unique Spatio-temporality and Living Experiences

This research has argued that density, despite a necessary element, should not be treated as a contextual container of urban society. As a commonly shared living experience, it is however not a simple, monotonous and invariable urban feature deserving merely immediate empirical understanding, whereas the intangible aspects, such as historical, political, and socio-economic processes, also contribute to producing its differences in terms of physical contours and subjective experiences. In other words, they are the elements what make density unique in every urban setting. However, it is also mythical to assume the development of density of a particular city is completely equivalent to its urban history. I suggested that density is a certain state of space, which was placed in a Lefebvrian theoretical framework in this study, as a ‘social space’ which should be understood along with the continuous interactions of the society, history (time), and geography (space) of the urban. To imagine density with such perspective allows us to probe deeper to and rethink about the origin, consequences, and significances of a series of man-space relations and pertinent response in alleviating or reshaping, for instance, undesired density or extreme dwelling which has been usually reduced to a demand-supply issue—instead of a realm of everyday life in which space and man interact each other in a more meaningful manner—a diverse manifestation of differentiation in experiencing ‘density’.

Therefore, this thesis suggests an alternative approach which emphases on the uniqueness and contrast of density of and within a city comprised of a series of existing, lost, or withering socio-spatial process and historical context. Some physical manifestations of density, albeit superficially similar, can be divergent in
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terms of their origin due to such unique spatial-historical interactions. This is the first step in re-politicizing the lost significances of urban density against a wave of reductionism in studying urban density issue, which should be far beyond a problem of material setting but an aspect of collective practices, plight, and resistance.

7.2.2   Urban Density of Hong Kong: A Problematic with No Simplification

Following this line, the nature of urban density in Hong Kong as a whole is also by no means a simple inquiry that can be easily generalized into certain kinds of theme and subject without a consideration on regional and district specificity. General spatial representations contributing to the development of urban fabric have long been disturbed by historical contingency and geographical constraints complicating and shaping regional characteristics of spatial practices. They resulted in differences diverging the meanings of density imposed on each of the geographical levels which are however not separated by boundary but meanwhile exert influence on each other. The understanding of Hong Kong’s urban development, especially in terms of density issues, necessitates a thorough deliberation on such historical and spatial subtleties and connections.

Accordingly, the urban study that, for instance, intend to come up with optimally standardized physical fabric by monotonous spatial design, as accomplished by URA in SSP, in order to deal with residentially induced density issue, must not overlook the regional difference that those spatio-temporal processes and interventions can make, defying one place’s sociality such as the residential situations of the have and the have-nots. Unfortunately, the analysis of this research shows that such negligence has gained its dominant role in future urban development in which a question of how to cope with urban intensity is still unavoidably substantial: especially when housing demand remains an urgent political issue to be resolved within existing institutional framework.

7.2.3   Density of Sham Shui Po: In Search of Alternative Spatial Practices, Inspired by the Past

Similarly, the study of SSP, as discussed in literature review, reveals manifold isolated research focuses which are still dominantly theme-based rather than a synoptic study of a region. This thesis however showcases how those urban
elements, such as architectural features, residential conditions, and political decisions, can be linked meaningfully by revealing their temporal development and the consequential alteration of urban fabric and its significance which could sufficiently convert the combination of situated agents’ spatial practices and the network of social relations in producing certain urban density. The discovery of some lost social relations throughout urban history may contribute to alternative methods in managing or reshaping relations between urban residents and their spaces of intensity, given a proper re-contextualization. This approach orients people to seek for alternative urbanism, by unfolding the path of urban development as a totality of all possible social relations, both abstract and concrete ones, and spatio-temporalities—a reconnection of the past urban reality buried by the immediacy of urban physicality.

For example, as elaborated in chapter 4, the management of urban density in SSP had ever been a trilateral ‘checks and balances’ among economic power, political consideration, and social-environmental threat and reality whose ability in constraining the overwhelming role of the former two had however been gradually weakening and have even submitted to them in recent days—e.g. the disappearance of (at least visually) the publicness and physical plight of residential density due partially to more sophisticated density control and mechanism of urban development and technological improvement in public health and architecture. Recognizing such situation leads us to further inquiry and consideration on any feasible method with contemporary relevance to revive a social-environmental check on the urban density development in Hong Kong propped largely by the logic of capitalist production (the power of urban renewal in the case of SSP) and its long-lasting collusion or trade-off with economic-political elites. This is possible only when the spatial-temporalities of urban world are rightly and deeply understood.

7.2.4 From a Lefebvrian Inquiry to a Critical Urban Theory of Our Own

The use of Lefebvrian concepts in this research is far from a simple transplantation of western urban theory by which a universal framework is tested to fit into a specific context. This is substantial when his theories are immersed with rich French urban experiences and inevitably with disparate social processes from Hong Kong, let alone, in specific, their own trajectory and implications of
high density urban development, which are also not a main concern in Lefebvre’s works. To deal with such problem, this thesis has attempted to ‘purify’ his spatial theory in constructing a theoretical framework in order to prevent disturbance from any unwanted contextual element and render the spatial trialectics valid in applying to the research area. Nevertheless, I prefer to regard the theory as a ‘catalyst’ between particular local elements and general (yet also locally situated) socio-spatial processes, so as to elicit deeper implications and to uncover more specific social relations (e.g. spatial traps and mismatches in the case of SSP), rather than as a universalized skeleton for a combination of simplified historical explanations towards an expected outcome (i.e. the high density space of SSP).

By doing so, Lefebvre’s urban spatial theory, which emphasizes on urban openness and transforming totality, unlike those ‘society and context-free’ urban studies on density issue of Hong Kong, still flexibly provides a way-out to accommodate urban uniqueness. A critical interpretation of Hong Kong as a social space should not be merely built upon a handy abstraction but first on the concrete particularities of a space—whether its history, geography, or sociality. This thesis is therefore a preliminary attempt, though immature, to reveal and to connect all these elements, as well as to assure the significance of local variety in truly understanding the problematic of urban density.
APPENDIX

Question Guide for Interviews

This question guide shows only a general orientation of interview. The questions were also subject to the response of informants who were allowed to answer in an open-ended manner. In other words, depending on the situation, not all questions were used, and follow-up questions were asked if necessary.

1. Personal Information

1.1 Individual:
1.1.1 Name
1.1.2 Age
1.1.3 Education level
1.1.4 Length of residency in Hong Kong

1.2 Household:
1.2.1 Family size
1.2.2 Composition
1.2.3 Network of relatives (place of abode)

1.3 Historical background:
1.3.1 Place of origin?
1.3.2 *(if not indigenous)* When and why did you come to Hong Kong?
1.3.3 Way of abode?
1.3.4 General situation before coming to Hong Kong? (Economic, residential conditions, family, etc.)
1.3.5 Before you came, what was your impression and expectation on Hong Kong? How much did you know about Hong Kong?
1.3.6 What is your overall impression on Hong Kong now?
1.3.7 General impression on SSP (past and recent)?
1.3.8 Why Sham Shui Po? Any other choices?

2. Recent Living Condition and Expectation

2.1 When did you move to your recent dwelling?
2.2 Rent or purchase? (What is the monthly rent?)
2.3 What are the reasons for choosing this place?
2.4 Where did you reside before coming here? What kind of housing was it? How long did you stay there?
2.5 Have you sought for alternative housing?
2.6 What is your first impression and recent feeling on your domestic space?
2.7 Is your dwelling self-contained? Is there any difficulty living here?
2.8 By what means did you find this place?
2.9 What is the relationship between you and your landlord (or real estate agent)? How is this relationship arranged and maintained?
2.10 Has your landlord increased your rent? If yes, how much and how often is it?
2.11 What is the size of your flat?

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2.12 What do you think about your living condition?
2.13 Do you think residential density has made troubles on your daily life? If yes, how?
2.14 Have you applied for public housing? How many years have you been waiting for? Have you ever given up your assigned flat? Why? (If no: reasons for not applying?)
2.15 What are your feelings about public housing?
2.16 Would you wish to stay at SSP if you have been assigned a flat of public housing? Would you mind if you have to move to other district? How far from SSP would it be unacceptable?
2.17 Do you like to live in SSP? Why? Are there any other possible districts you would like to live?

3. Economic Status
3.1 What is your recent occupation? (What was your job before retirement or unemployment?)
3.2 How much is your salary?
3.3 What is the nature of your work?
3.4 Where is your workplace? How far is it from your home?
3.5 How much is your spending on transport every day?
3.6 Household income per month?
3.7 Family monthly expenditure? Considerations on the spending?
3.8 Do you have any financial difficulty?
3.9 Have you applied for any financial assistance scheme?

4. Social and Family Relations, Social network
4.1 How is your relation with neighbourhood?
4.2 Any social conflict?
4.3 Have you joined any activities organized by any social organizations? (e.g. community centre)
4.4 Do you have close relation with your relatives?
4.5 How did you develop your social network? Where do you have social contacts with others? How do you maintain it? (e.g. making friends)
4.6 Any difficulties in developing social relations (e.g. cultural problem)
4.7 (For new immigrants) Do you have any problem in adopting new living and social environment?
4.8 Do you receive support (e.g. monetary support) from your relatives or friends?
4.9 How do you contact them? How often?
4.10 Do you receive support from social workers or other organization? If yes, how did you contact and know them?
4.11 What kind of information about SSP do you need the most? Why? How do you receive the information?
5. Social Awareness and Imagination of Urban Change
5.1 Do you know the activities of urban redevelopment in SSP?
5.2 Are you aware of any social and physical transformation of SSP?
5.3 Do you concern with the activities of URA or real estate agencies/developers?
5.4 Have you joined any local social movement? (e.g. concern group?)
5.5 What is your prospect on the future development of SSP? (e.g. physical and social, residential)
5.6 (For interviewees influenced by URA renewal project) What are your strategies in dealing with urban renewal issue? Have you sought for assistance?
5.7 What kinds of problem have the URA created in the renewal project influencing you and your family?
5.8 What do you expect on the result of the renewal project? Do you think you can be able to improve your residential situation?

6. Spatial Practices
6.1 Residential space
6.1.1 Layout of home and spatial elements?
6.1.2 Space allocation? Ways to extend usable space?
6.1.3 Use of domestic space and reasons
6.1.4 Special features? (e.g. temporal change)
6.1.5 Changes and differences from the past

6.2 Perceptions on outdoor spaces
6.2.1 Feelings about surroundings, neighbours and neighbourhood?
6.2.2 Explanation on the daily routine of all household members (living, working, entertainment, circulation)
6.2.3 Sensory perception of the space, workplace, street (environment, building design, hygiene, etc.)
6.2.4 Movement on the streets?
6.2.5 Amount of time spent on the street?
6.2.6 Streetscape: how do you interact with people and things on streets?
6.2.7 Any special observation from the streets?
6.2.8 What is your pattern of consumption on streets? What kind of commercial space do you prefer? (e.g. shopping malls, shops, hawker stalls, etc.)
6.2.9 Way of dealing with unwanted social contacts, environments?
6.2.10 Feeling on high physical and social density?
6.2.11 Frequency of facing high density in the outdoor environments in SSP?
6.2.12 Awareness of changing features of the streets? (physical and temporal transformations)
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