

# COMMUNALITY WITHOUT COLLECTIVITY

FOTAN, HONG KONG

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The Fotan industrial village is located in the North East part of Hong Kong; tucked away in the New Territories on the mainland<sup>1</sup>, it is, to many (even those who live in Hong Kong), a world away. Unlike Central, whose skyline is the face of the city, the humble industrial estate is not graced by the design of world famous architects. Like many other industrial areas, the unremarkable concrete buildings were originally built for light industries; but as the cost of real estate and labour reached for the sky, factories moved north of the border into mainland China. These industrial estates that stood for the past 50 years have witnessed Hong Kong's economic backbone shift from manufacturing to finance. The loading bays that have seen the heyday of this era mutely observed as the containers and traffic dwindled. Fotan, as with other industrial areas of Hong Kong, quietly became forgotten. Today, apart from a handful of printing business and food processing plants, the majority of the units have turned into offices and storage spaces.

Hong Kong prides itself as the financial centre of Asia, but what the celebrated skyline of bank towers also points to, is a lack of investment and support for the development of art and culture. Coupled with high property prices, artists have long been victims of the neo-liberal economy in the city also known to insiders as the "cultural-desert". In a capital driven society, industrial spaces from a bygone era became the only haven for displaced artists, which offered relatively large spaces at a low cost well-suited to the setting up of studios and workshops. Most of these studios are independent but they are united by the cheaper rent that the older

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<sup>1</sup>The geographical territory of Hong Kong is composed of Hong Kong Island, Kowloon Peninsula and the New Territories. Hong Kong island houses the Central Business District and is often regarded as the heart of Hong Kong. The Kowloon Peninsula and the North Eastern New Territories are located on the continent bordering with mainland China.

buildings offer. Local painters, sculptors, carpenters, designers slowly gathered and settled in the emptied units of the massive blocks of towers. As the trend gained momentum, a critical mass formed and Fotan became a hub for local artists.

These newcomers are not always welcome and are in fact often met with raised eyebrows from older tenants from the industrial era. The young, often hip and rather bohemian group of youngsters is perceived to be somewhat interrupting the normal running of business<sup>2</sup>. Artists and local entrepreneurs sit rather uncomfortably alongside each other, each keeping to their own territory. This is in turn juxtaposed with a precariousness from the government: from a legal perspective, industrial lease requires the units to be used for production or go down purposes. As many of these businesses and artists are not technically adhering to the lease, the common secret joins these occupants in an unspoken pact, each tacitly maintaining cover for the other.

For most of the year, Fotan operates to a normal business rhythm and the only sign of artists are the dispersed lights in various buildings that shine late into the night. All except for the weekends of one month in the year, when studios open its doors for *Fotanian* – a festival where artists invite the public to view their workshops and their work. During that time, a striking transformation takes place. Shutters are pulled up and doors are pulled back, letting music and light flood the dark and quiet corridors. The streets, deserted by the weekday workforce, are replaced by crisscrossing visitors armed with maps. The cargo lifts, usually smoothly operated by professional workmen, jolted in the hand of amateurs. The whole area transforms itself into a giant art safari, where not only galleries, but buildings and roads and local *daipai dongs*<sup>3</sup> also become part of the scene. Fotan, with its lack of attractions is not a usual destination, and for many, industrial spaces were as much of an exotic experience as the art.

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<sup>2</sup>According to the Planning Department of Hong Kong Government, the majority of industrial floor space is used for warehouse/ storage purposes (55.9%), second and third largest uses are office (11.9%) and ancillary office (8.7%) (Industrial Report 2009) The majority of offices house trading companies which most deals with business in China.

<sup>3</sup>Local outdoor eateries – roast pigeons and chicken congee are Fotan's specialty.



Figure 1. Floor numbers. Photo: Stan Diers ([www.standiers.com](http://www.standiers.com))

*Fotanian*, as the first art festival of its kind in Hong Kong, has been growing steadily in the past ten years and 2013 was by and far the largest one ever to be held, with over 100 studios and 300 artists participating. With the increasing success

of the event, sponsors came in with money and publicity, talks were organized, apps were built and there was even a mobile exhibition truck cruising the streets of Hong Kong. The success of the festival indicates that while the presence of artists in the area are not fully supported by the law<sup>4</sup> they are, however, not completely clandestine either. The precarious presence of the live-in artists exists in between the legal/illegal boundary. But why are they tolerated and how does this community operate?

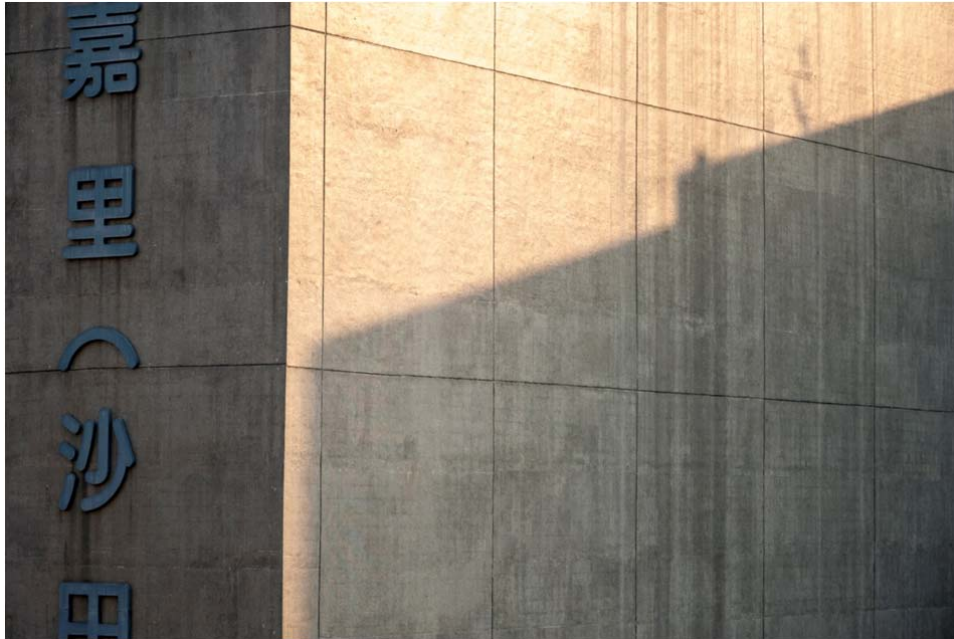


Figure 2. Industrial building. Photo: Stan Diers ([www.standiers.com](http://www.standiers.com))

The tacitly maintained boundaries between artists, entrepreneurs, visitors and to a certain extent, even the government, operate on a delicate balance which counts on each turning a blind eye. Within this environment, individuals employ their own tactics to find ways of slipping between the formal structures and rules. They recognize what they can get away with, they surf on the margins of what is permissible, teasing the boundaries of what is punishable. The rule that somehow operates beside the law carefully crafts out an environment where Fotan flourishes within the carefully maintained boundaries.

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<sup>4</sup> Many artists also make their homes in these studios which is illegal according to Hong Kong Law; but they are not the first or the only ones, due to the unaffordability of the city's housing prices, many of the urban poor live in illegally subdivided bedsits in industrial units.

Rather than arguing for the need to legitimize through governmental intervention, it seems that the current paradoxical presence of all the parties involved is in itself the perfect balance. The government's strategy of revitalization often means redevelopment<sup>5</sup> with the goal of tearing down old depilated buildings to build new ones more in line with the modern façade of Hong Kong. Unfortunately, the mere mention of such intention in the 2009 policy address has already resulted in the doubling of prices over a period of 2 years causing many artists to strain under the increased rent. Already, developers and speculators are circling the units like vultures, buying them up with increasing speed. Like many new developments in Hong Kong, high prices of homogenous spaces after regeneration often become a sterile deathbed for creativity.

The re-appropriation of industrial spaces by artists as well as entrepreneurs are individuals' way of making-do<sup>6</sup> with the ever-expanding urban-regulatory environment. The multiple ways in which these spaces are creatively imagined introduce a plurality of goals and desires into the otherwise deserted buildings.

Behind the quiet façade these units pulse with a myriad of activities. There is in fact no need for governmental intervention; revitalization has already taken place – if revitalization means to re-enliven a space, to make it more active, vivacious, spirited and to give it more life. A creative space is not a space that can be fashioned through management. Regenerated areas of Hong Kong (and surely other parts of the world) have proved prone to gentrification. A creative space, or an vitalized space is a space that allows for life, by which I mean a space that enables individuals to create meanings through their practices, which are by nature, plural, multiple and multi-directional. It is what facilitates ideas and collaborations to be forged, festivals such as Fotanian to be generated.

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<sup>5</sup>The Revitalizing Industrial Buildings Policy introduced in 2009-10 policy address is defined by the new measures to promote revitalization through “encouraging redevelopment and wholesale conversion” (Hong Kong Development Bureau 2010)

<sup>6</sup> Individuals' resourceful ways of appropriating in everyday life is of particular interest to cultural theorist Michel de Certeau, who regards these practices as a form of tactics, understood as power for the powerless; this is opposed to strategies which are institutional or structures of power (1988) *The Practice of Everyday Life* University of California Press.



Figure 3. Rooftops. Photo: Stan Diers ([www.standiers.com](http://www.standiers.com))

The brutalist buildings of the industrial era might not make it onto Hong Kong's postcards but within the concrete walls, displaced individuals find their footholds that enable each to pursue his/her own goals, creating a functioning system in Fotan where there is communality without collectivity. If revitalization could be understood from the perspective of enlivening a space, then the value of Fotan lies precisely as such.

***Visuals by:***

Stan Diers, Graphic Designer

[www.standiers.com](http://www.standiers.com)