

# Rediscovering our shared urban spaces

The ACU's annual Summer School brings students from across the Commonwealth together for a week of workshops, lectures, field trips, and group work. In 2018, the theme will be 'Sustainable cities and communities', exploring the challenges and opportunities inherent in urbanisation. Hosted by the Chinese University of Hong Kong, participants will learn more about a concept which lies at the heart of the institution's urban studies programme – the 'urban commons'. **Alex Frew McMillan** tells us more.



What makes a city great? What are the challenges for an urban environment? And how should emerging-world communities evolve? The urban studies programme at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) seeks to answer these questions, using Hong Kong as a petri dish for city planning.

A major theme of the programme is 're-commoning' – the potential for rediscovering and reclaiming shared urban spaces for the public good – and sometimes in unusual ways.

## What is an urban common?

The idea of the common or commons has its roots in medieval England. Originally an area of open land set aside for grazing farm animals and other public use, many of these spaces have since been lost to industrialisation or claimed as private property. Where they still exist, they are often swathes of land used for dog walking, jogging, and so on.

The idea of an 'urban common' is also a public space set aside for community use. However, it does not have to be a public park; it does not have to be a community centre. It does not even have to be publicly owned.

It can just as easily be a street full of hawkers selling street food, where the elderly join the young for an evening stroll, a bit to eat, and a chat. It could be a 'wet market' where shoppers chat to vendors and drop in for their produce. It could be a working pier where dockhands unload ships, old men fish, and lovers hold hands to watch the sunset.

'This picture in which everything is dominated by either the government or the market is not a real image,' says Professor Mee Kam Ng, director of CUHK's urban studies programme. 'We still have a lot of commons in our lives. We need to rediscover and explore them – to use them as a collective resource, not just for profit-making or government.'

Gradually, though, many of our urban commons are already being lost. Wet markets

move indoors and to higher floors; the bustling streets are sanitised and changed through the addition of railings, parking spaces, escalators, and barriers that disrupt the flow of foot traffic and erode the sense of community.

Even the addition of helpful public infrastructure – subway lines, bus terminals, and train stations – may have unintended consequences. Travel may become more convenient for many, but the increase in rents in the neighbourhood may force poorer residents out of an area they have, for decades, called home.

## Can individuals be trusted with shared resources?

The concept of the commons is not without its critics. The 'tragedy of the commons', a term first popularised by the ecologist Garrett Hardin in 1968, holds that every individual who has access to a shared resource will simply exploit it for his or her own good, without considering its public utility. This eventually results in shared grassland being

overgrazed, for instance, but can apply to any urban feature.

Others disagree, however. Elinor Ostrom, who won the Nobel Prize for economics in 2009, disagreed with the idea that the public would inevitably trash their shared resources. Given the time and opportunity to speak out, she argued, communities will often work out rules to protect common resources, using them fairly and sustainably.

Professor Ng agrees with Ostrom that the 'tragedy of the commons' does not have to hold true. 'We can maintain a common pool of resources,' she says. 'Give people time and information, and they will work out a scheme to use the commons to satisfy everyone's needs while still sustaining the resource.'

## Preserving heritage

In Hong Kong, the cluster of buildings around, and including, the historic Blue House in Wan Chai is just one example of a successful re-commoning project. The government's original plan was to convert the neighbourhood into modern shops. But through the efforts of local residents, social workers, and heritage conservation groups, the redevelopment took an unprecedented path for Hong Kong. It preserved the existing buildings for use by community-based social enterprises, allowed existing tenants to remain if they chose (while improving living standards), and created a 'good neighbour' scheme that gives priority to new occupiers who commit to contributing to the community.

The repurposing of this group of buildings also incorporates new features, such as the Hong Kong Story House – a space set aside for preserving the oral history of the district. There are also shared areas for use by local markets. Instead of commodifying the space as private property, it has been turned into a public/private space that satisfies housing needs while also providing jobs, economic opportunities, social utility, and greenery.

The idea of re-commoning may be

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particularly relevant in developing societies, where it is all too easy to assume that bulldozing old neighbourhoods and repopulating them with gleaming steel-and-glass skyscrapers is the way forward. We hope that our students will learn that the path taken by the world's developed economies is not the only road to progression. It may be that preserving old neighbourhoods and allowing them to grow and modernise organically is a better course of action.

'Many developing countries – such as Thailand and Cambodia – already have urban commons,' says Professor Ng. 'But literally in front of their eyes, these commons are disappearing. Authorities are forbidding people to trade on the street. They are banning hawkers and taking away the wide streets.'

### Retaining culture and character

In times of rapid change, it should not be seen as 'backward' to explore, retain, and celebrate a country's traditional elements, culture, and character. We encourage our students to examine how some of Hong Kong's neighbourhoods have lost their sense of identity or history – from former fishing villages to mining communities – in the hope that these young people will revisit their own.

'We hope students will have the maturity to appreciate their own communities more, and not see them as backward or developing,' says Professor Ng. 'Instead, we encourage them to see their communities as having rich treasures, which can be kept even as they

modernise. Communities should have an urbanisation of their own – rich in their own history, heritage, and character – not just copy what they see in other developed countries.'

### A sense of community

In urban planning, too much emphasis is sometimes placed on efficiency at the expense of our sense of community, says Professor Hendrik Tieben, architect and programme director for urban design at CUHK. Tieben points to an example in Hong Kong's Western District, where he feels the government has redeveloped its central street – with its thriving traditional markets – into a 'concrete slab'. While close to a cluster of public hospitals and healthcare facilities, the redevelopment offers no easy path for elderly people to reach them, thanks to difficult traffic crossings, raised sidewalks, and railings. 'It's not all about getting from A to B as fast as possible,' says Professor Tieben. 'You have to have seating, easy access, a concept of who is benefitting. People must feel at home there.'

To encourage Hong Kong's neighbourhoods to appreciate their sense of community, the university launched an educational project called 'Magic Carpet', which aims to document daily life, engage communities in their own development, and encourage a more inclusive version of urban design. The project has been rolled out across different neighbourhoods, with journalism students interviewing residents about their communities, and architecture students exploring the potential for community-orientated development.

The project also hosts community-wide events in each neighbourhood, to foster a broader understanding of urban issues and help rethink the whole idea of participation. It is not enough to present local residents with a set of prescribed options for urban development and ask them to pick from that set list of ideas, Professor Tieben believes. By encouraging residents to examine how even the smallest of urban features fits into their neighbourhood, the project organisers hope to stimulate fresh thought and make people realise they can effect change on the ground level.

Another project backed by the university recently won the inaugural Wendy Sarkissian Award for 'courage in the field of community engagement'. Stakeholders – including fabric sellers, fashion designers, academics, built environment professionals, and volunteers – worked together to save the Pang Jai fabric market from government-forced closure. They hope to reshape it as a viable market, with a fashion showroom, a lab for developing textiles, and a site for sharing skills – demonstrating the essence of re-commoning for the public good.

### A humanistic approach to city planning

At the 2018 ACU Summer School, students will be invited to consider what has worked and what has not in Hong Kong's rapid metamorphosis from fishing village to developing town, then from thriving economic hub to post-industrial 21st century service economy – and there's much that urban planners can draw on by examining Hong Kong and its people.

Ultimately, we hope that graduates in the 21st century will be able to create or adopt a more humanistic approach to city planning, development and evolution – one that does not just look at numbers, market forces, and utility. 'When we talk about economics, it can be rather cold-blooded,' says Professor Ng. 'But we are not just economists, we are urbanists.' ■

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The revitalised Blue House in Hong Kong