

## SERVICE SPACE

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**ABSTRACT:** Hong Kong is a fast developing city, driven by the forces of the global market. The related process of continuous optimization is also reflected in the situation of domestic workers in Hong Kong. This paper shows how this social insertion is expressed spatially as well-fitting plug-in-part within Hong Kong's private and public spaces, perfectly integrated economically, and sharply segregated socially. It shows the situation of the individual as a result of a pragmatic solution within a global economic network, which is oscillating between mutual benefit and discriminating exploitation. The maids not only form a backbone of Hong Kong's social and economic life, through their forced exhibitionism they strongly contribute to the formation of the city's urban culture.

**KEYWORDS:** global economy, domestic work, segregation or integration, service space, new urban culture

### 1 INTRODUCTION

Over the decades Hong Kong has developed into a highly efficient system of control to enable an extremely dense living condition, forming to some extent a model Metropolis - a realized utopia. The built icons of financial power and spaces of touristic interest of Hong Kong are well known and advertised: At its core Victoria Harbour is bordered by the continuously rising and approaching skylines of Hong Kong Island and Kowloon, which are reflecting the economic growth in built form. Shopping Malls, together with Restaurants, Hotels and Cinemas form highly complex spatial systems of air-conditioned indoor-entertainment, which entirely rely on the concept of consumption. Having established one of the most efficient transport systems in the world, Hong Kong offers a daily spectacle of mass transportation, finding its peak in the accomplishment of Chek Lap Kok airport which handled 48,585,000 passengers in 2008<sup>1</sup>. Already in 1982 amongst the inspirational metropolises for the movie-set for *Blade-Runner* by Ridley Scott, the density, dimension and sparkle of these interconnected towers, decorated with over dimensional advertising screens still gives an impression of lived science fiction to the first-time visitor. What is usually not talked about are the behind-the-scene spaces, the energy it takes to keep this gigantic machine running, and the acceptance of a certain constraint in living quality for a large part of its population, which enables efficiency based on density. This paper aims to depict a view from the perspective of female migrant workers, who come to Hong Kong to take up jobs as servants in private households, and thereby contribute to establishing and running the cities' *Service Space*.

### 2 FORMATION OF SERVICE SPACE

Service has always been part of urban societies, which are characterized by ethnic and cultural diversity, division of labour, and differences in social status. On one hand this is taking shape in the service industries with distinct professional groups formed by citizens of full rights and social recognition. On the other hand, since ancient times, there has existed the notion of the servant, who in many historic examples has been part of a group of people of different ethnic origin, who, through international dynamics, was forced or allowed to enter the new country, but with a distinct differentiation in terms of legal rights to the full citizen. A new class of servants, which has evolved within the past thirty years in the global economy, started to evolve with Philippine women migrating to the world's economical powerhouses:

In the 1970's the Philippines went into a severe recession. In order to combat the rising unemployment rate as well as to cure the financial deficit, the government started to promote overseas

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labour, which led to the situation that up until today more than 10% (around 8.1 million) of the Philippine population has migrated to overseas destinations to live outside the country on a working contract<sup>2</sup>.

At the same time Hong Kong's economy started booming with a steady growth of GDP "at an annual rate of nearly 6.5 per cent between 1965 and 1989"<sup>3</sup>, marking the transformation of the city from a manufacturing base into a financial centre. The resulting high demand for labour in the service industries mobilised women participation in the market, which contributed to the wealth of middle- and upper class families, and further produced a rising demand for help with the now "second burden" of household work and childcare. In 1975 a first 1000 women from the Philippines were approved to enter Hong Kong on a domestic workers contract.<sup>4</sup> Continuing demand on both sides fostered the growth of the number of Filipinas to 59,915 in 1991, and to 111,670 in 1996. Their percentage within Hong Kong's population reached its peak in 2001 with 4% (136,318).<sup>5</sup> The increase of 72.4% in the number of women in the labour force between 1986 and 2006 (as compared to 13.8% increase in the number of men), is therefore inextricably intertwined with the immigration of Filipinas, and is a result of both, the import of female workforce as well as a rise of Hong Kong women entering particularly the areas of trade, finance and tourism<sup>6</sup>.

In the 1990's, Indonesia followed the Philippine model of labour export, and within ten years the Indonesian population in Hong Kong grew to the same size as the Philippine proportion, and even surpassed it in 2008. Today there are 126,754 Filipinas, 131,072 Indonesian, and 6,744 women of other nationalities (Thai, Sri Lankan, Indian) abiding in Hong Kong on domestic working contracts, summing up to a total of 264,570 maids in August 2009<sup>7</sup>. These women leave their own husbands, children, and higher education behind to take care of household, children and elderly to free Hong Kong parents to follow their careers.

It is remarkable, that the education level of foreign domestic workers is relatively high: A half of Hong Kong's imported household managers have a post-secondary education, notably a quarter of all maids even holds a university or post-graduate degree. These figures are mainly nourished by the exceptionally high percentage of higher education within the group of Filipinas<sup>8</sup>. Therefore their scope of work not only encompasses household chores and caretaking of children and elderly, but also in-house-tutoring, in particular supporting the improvement of the children's skills in English language. The employment of foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong induces a change of gender role in both countries: It not only enables an increased competitiveness of Hong Kong women in the upper labour market and therefore a better balance between the genders; the fact that half of the foreign domestic helpers have become the main breadwinners in their own families, might as well lead to shifts in their own family role back in their home countries.<sup>9</sup>

This group of migrant women, specialising in domestic service, has grown into an integrated part of the economy of Hong Kong's and the lifestyle of its middle and upper class society. Their right to stay in Hong Kong is bonded with their employment as domestic helper, this creating a particular status with clearly defined rights and duties, including the limitation of each contract period to two years, and the prohibition of the possibility of becoming a permanent resident in Hong Kong. This framework creates a condition of short- to long-term temporality and reinforces the split of a life between two places and two cultures.

Maria<sup>10</sup> is a domestic helper in Hong Kong since 1982. Within that period she has worked for 20 different employers of various cultural backgrounds, only three of the families were of Chinese origin. The money she earns – which in the meantime is high in comparison with the minimum salary for maids – has been sent back to the Philippines; first to support the education of her siblings, and later on of their children - her nieces and nephews. Her life is fully devoted to the families of her employers as well as to those of her brothers and sisters. Herself, she has never been married. Maria has no intention to move back to the Philippines: She says she loves her job. Even though it took her 2 years to adapt to the climate and lifestyle in Hong Kong; after 27 years of living here she calls it now her home. Conversely, Hong Kong will never call her a citizen, as in contrary to all immigrants to the Special Administrative Region other than foreign domestic workers, who are entitled to apply for permanent residency after seven consecutive years of stay on employment visa.

Social differences and hierarchies have always been part of urban life. The situation of this new class of servants is a result of a pragmatic solution within a global economic network, which is balancing between mutual benefit and discriminating exploitation. My interest here is not to judge from a sociological or political point of view, but to explore the living condition of the foreign domestic helpers in Hong Kong with a focus on space and urban culture. Due to the pre-conditions of immigration and employment the configuration of the living and working spaces for female migrants is very different, sometimes inverted,

compared to the “normal” Hong Kong resident. Within this context, *Service Space* describes the entire spatial realm maids are occupying in the city. The following will redraw this spatial network and by discussing three aspects of it – *Forced Exhibitionism*, *Time-Share-City* and *Serving Service Space* – aims to describe its relevance for the group of female migrants and to reveal its contribution to Hong Kong’s unique urban culture.

## 2 PARS FAMILIAE AND FORCED EXHIBITIONISM

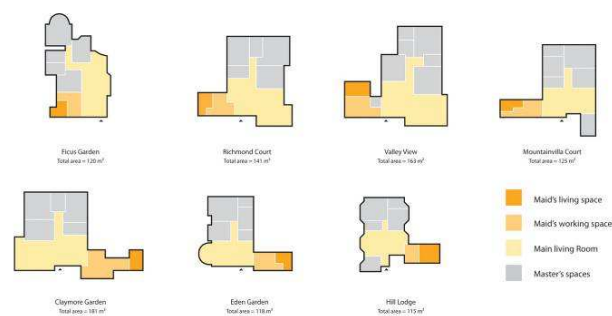
The laws for employment regulate a minimum salary for the domestic workers as well as a provision of living space by the employer; therefore most maids live with Hong Kong families under a range of conditions. The immigration department formulates the required provision of accommodation as follows:

While the average flat size in Hong Kong is relatively small and the availability of separate servant room is not common, the Employer should provide the Helper suitable accommodation and with reasonable privacy. Examples of unsuitable accommodation are: The Helper having to sleep on made-do beds in the corridor with little privacy and sharing a room with an adult/teenager of the opposite sex.<sup>11</sup>

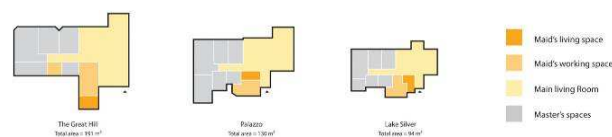
As space in general in Hong Kong is limited and expensive, and as the living space to be offered to the domestic helper is not further defined, the actual provision is kept to a minimum.

Since the eighties a standardized version of this required space provision can be found in Hong Kong private residential developments: The “maid’s room”, sometimes also tagged as “workers room“, “utility room“ or “storage”, is a small space with minimal dimensions and sanitary installation, situated adjacent to the kitchen and the laundry space, which are the main domains for the helper’s household work. Responding to the meaning of the various descriptions for this part of the apartment, the maid’s bedroom might have to serve at the same time as storage for the household and also as utility room. Some of the residential layouts provide a second entrance to this part of the flat, allowing a more direct access to the rubbish collection points in the building. As a side effect the “service door” establishes a stronger division between the maids’s quarters and the families’ living rooms.

Recent developer’s projects don’t show much interest in further improving this “well accepted” setup. In a recently accomplished private development, which is aggressively advertised for its abundant luxury, none of the provided “spaces for work” (literal translation from the Chinese tag on the plan) has a window to the outside.



**Figure 1** Apartment Plans with maid’s quarters in private residential developments built in 1980’s



**Figure 2** Apartment Plans with maid’s quarters, private residential development, accomplished in 2009

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In any case, such separate space creating a minimal private sphere for the maid for her rest and personal hygiene is provided by rich employers, who are spatially well-off. Average Chinese families can afford a maid, but not the space, so the maid's quarters within the apartment only exist on a make shift basis in the children's room or the living room, or sometimes even in the kitchen.

Ulee<sup>12</sup> is a young woman of Indonesian origin, who had been working as a nurse in her home country. She came to Hong Kong in 2003, following a recommendation by a friend and tempted by the thought of getting to know a different culture and enlarging her working experience. She underestimated the difference between working in a hospital and the job of a domestic helper, as well as the cultural differences. Her employer's family lives in a 2-bedroom apartment. The parents sleep in the master bedroom, Ulee shares the room with the two children, which in the meantime grew 10 and 12 years old, a girl and a boy. For her personal items she has some wardrobe space in the children's room, her bed is pulled out one of the children's beds each evening. She feels very strongly the discrepancy between her daily life being tightly bond with the family and the fact that within that she still stays an outsider: She is the one who has to react to and to fulfil the needs of the children and their parents, but not the other way round. The reciprocity of care is missing, which is a natural result of this relationship being an employment. This level of personal exchange also corresponds to her expectations regarding this relationship and to her judgement of possible mutual understanding due to cultural differences. Nevertheless, as her living space is equal to her working place on a 24 hours base, privacy and the possibility to meet interlocutors of her trust is not given during week time. The mornings on weekdays, when the parents are at work and the children at school, give her more breathing space within the apartment. Besides her household chores, this is the time when she has enough privacy to make phone calls home. The resentment of being a stranger whose space of action is closely interweaved with and determined by the one of a family of a different culture, leads to a feeling of isolation, which she tries to overcome on her day off, and which she has not got used to in the six years of staying in Hong Kong.

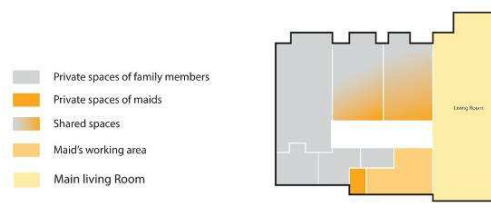
Why commit to such a situation then? Domestic helpers are servants by free will. The wages they receive in Hong Kong are better than in their home countries; often they would even have difficulties to get a job there at all. The recruitment fees to pay to come to Hong Kong are much lower than for European destinations, which would promise better earnings and the employment conditions by the Hong Kong government grant them better protection, rights and pay than in other places of choice such as Saudi Arabia or Singapore. Still, the salaries maids earn are far not competitive from a Hong Kong perspective. The helper could not just choose to rent outside the apartment as her financial position does not give her this room for consideration within Hong Kong's highly overpriced real estate market. The law for employment demanding the living space provision within the employer's apartment is therefore not only a result of this condition but also the only possible solution for habitation for foreign domestic helpers in Hong Kong.

In ancient Rome the word *familia* could signify the free persons living under a *pater familiae* and deriving from the same ancestors, therefore describing a bond based on consanguinity, but in a wider sense as well all persons under the *potestas* of a family father, meaning the power of one private person onto another, which also includes the meaning of *ownership* in regard to slaves. "In its widest sense Familia comprehends all that is subjected to the will of an individual, who is *sui juris*, both free persons, slaves, and objects of property."<sup>13</sup>

In Chinese the word 家 (*jiā*) signifies family, as well as home, house and apartment, therefore a social construct which is either shaped by kinship or defined by a space (or to speak in the symbolism of the mentioned character: a roof), which shows certain parallels with the roman understanding. The Chinese social circle is strongly rooted in family ties, and the employment of a maid could mean in the first place her intrusion into that circle. In some Chinese families this intimate situation of maids living within their bonds leads them to formally integrate her in the family by calling her "sister". As with the chores she has to do, she is to a large extent replacing the traditional housewife, and therefore taking over cleaning, but also doing laundry, cooking and caring for children and elderly; her life is closely connected to the private life of her employers. Due to the fact of employment there still is a clear separation in terms of emotional life, family bounds and personal freedom, which finds its spatial expression in the use of the apartment: The space the maid occupies shrinks and grows in phases following the families' daily rhythm. During daytime her working space extends over the entire apartment. When the family is at home or having a meal her activity

will usually be restricted to the kitchen and the eating place to serve the meals. At night time she retreats to her private sphere which most of the times is just large enough for her to find room to sleep.

One example of an apartment I visited, the family (six people: mother, father, three children, grandma), employed two maids, one for the children, one for the household and the care of the grandma. The older one of the helpers would sleep in the room of the two younger children, whereas her niece shares the room with the grandma, since the maid's room is used as storage space. Therefore the oldest child, the daughter, sleeps in the living room. The space available is shared and negotiated by all the inhabitants, all by maintaining the invisible social borders between family and maids, which are based on a clear hierarchy coming along with the employer – employee relationship.



**Figure 3** Plan of a flat shared by 6 family members and 2 maids

This socio-cultural construct, which has been well established itself in Hong Kong within the past thirty years, formally integrates a person in a family, economically determines her as employee, socially determines her as servant and spatially exercises power in the ancient sense of the *potestas* of a *pater familiae*: Despite Hong Kong laws and regulations on the employment of domestic workers, their execution is pretty much depending on the respective will and judgement of the household head. This fact leads to a constriction of the helpers personal freedom: More or less fortunate regarding their living space provision due to the financial possibilities of their employers and their respective interpretation of *privacy* required by the employment laws, one aspect the living conditions for maids in Hong Kong have in common is that they lead to a life which is to a large extent controlled by the employer and which literally does not offer space for privacy.

On Sunday's, which is the most common weekly holiday granted by employers following the law to allow them 24 hours in succession of free time, the maids are forced into the cities open spaces due to the absence of better alternatives. Their private life is made public.

### 3 TIME SHARE CITY

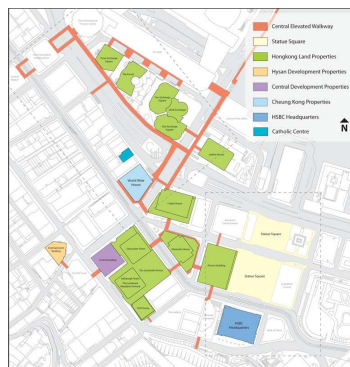
In a society where public life is dominated by necessary activities the quality of the public spaces is not an all-important issue. People will use the city spaces regardless of quality because they have to. This pattern can be seen all over the world in countries with less developed economies.<sup>14</sup>

It is often claimed that there is no public space in Hong Kong. Reasons for this phenomenon are manifold and can be found in Hong Kong's particular lifestyle, city planning and culture. In the past in Hong Kong, there have been two types of public space. One form is practically congruent with streetscape, which also reflects a Chinese version of a "public space" and which effectively emerges from a necessity and a need, such as hawker bazaars. The second type is a representative one, which has been established by the British government and which was as exclusive as symbolic<sup>15</sup>. In the development of Hong Kong, both types of public space are still existent, but have lost their power. On the one hand the streets tend to get "cleaned up" in the course of new development, so occupancy can only happen under restrictive control, on the other hand, the importance of the representational character of squares and plazas has declined in favour of the tallness and glossiness of Hong Kong's skyline, which its representing its economic power. The leisure habits of Hong Kong's population are economy driven as well – people spend their spare time in shopping malls and amusement parks rather than in nature or in the city's public realm. Public space in city planning has recently become an issue in Hong Kong, but the developments of previous decades have led to disconnections within the city fabric and hindered the provision of democratic open space.

This view is very much depending on the perspective. For domestic helpers the situation is inverted: While their working space is their employer's families' home, the private space which is allocated to them is minimal to inexistent; hence their life is forced to take place in public. Even though they are part of a developed economy, their situation is very much as described by Jan Gehl, the result of a pressing need. On their day off, domestic workers meet in particular public spaces, suspending some of the very strict regulations on use and behaviour within Hong Kong's public realm. As this usage of the open space differs strongly from the habits of Hong Kong's citizens, and as it only happens once a week, cities public realm is used in shifts by different social groups.

Central District is a prominent example for parts of it having turned into such *Time-Share-Space*. The area is dominated by office buildings, bank buildings and upper price retail in the podium levels. Footbridges provide convenient connections between the towers. Whilst during the week it forms the beating heart of Hong Kong's financial market, the problem faced in the 1980's was the place being deserted on the weekends. In 1982 Hong Kong Land's proposal to render the area more attractive to Hong Kong's citizens to use it as a weekend shopping destination<sup>16</sup> with a generous public pedestrian zone, led to a closure of Chater Road for traffic on Sunday's.

Soon afterwards another attractive patch was added to the assigned pedestrian area: in 1985 the third version of HSBC headquarters which presides Statue Square in the south, was accomplished based on a design by Sir Norman Foster. As one of the core ideas the building provides an extension of the open space under the bank building with the ground slightly sloping into the direction of the sea, sheltered by the elevated entrance level.



**Figure 3** Central Buildings, Open Space, Elevated Walkway System

Eventually “the public” attracted to Central's open space was not the group of people the developers, planners and commissioners had in mind: As in the course of the eighties, the number of foreign domestic helpers in Hong Kong quintupled, the amount of “spaceless” people on Sundays became more and more apparent, and Central District became one of their weekend destinations: Most Filipinas, and later on also Indonesian, Thai, and Nepalese women, spend their very few non-working-hours gathering with their compatriots. By using their home language, eating their national food, reading their national news, engaging in politics, and using the city following their own social conventions, the Foreign Domestic Workers are recreating on a weekly base their own culture, community and space. Whilst in principal domestic helpers gather in any places available on Sunday's in the city on both sides of Victoria Harbour, there have been specific areas emerging, which form identifiable zones with a distinct character, focus of activity, and even differentiation in Nationality: Whilst for example Filipinas gather around Central, Indonesians “own Causeway Bay”. This expression by a Filipina I interviewed shows very clearly the unconscious implicitness of the weekly taking over parts of Hong Kong and turning it into a *Time-Share-City*. The following selection of such zones focuses on Hong Kong Island and the Philippine Culture, illustrating some aspects of the phenomenon described:

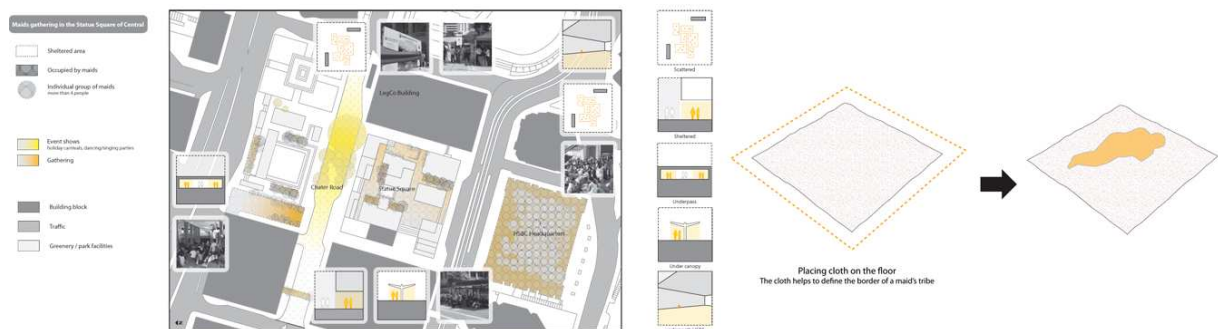
## 2.1 Forum

As Foreign Domestic Helpers are covered by the Employment Ordinance, they enjoy the same rights as workers, allowing unions, organisations, demonstrations as well as engagement in religious and cultural activities. This condition has fostered the establishment of e.g. several Trade Unions dealing with Migrant

Worker's issues<sup>17</sup> and has encouraged the Foreign Domestic Helpers to claim the rights granted by the Employment Laws and the Standard Employment Contract.

Due to their immediate proximity to the Legislative Council Building as well as their urban setup, the pedestrianised areas around Chater Road and Statue Square in Hong Kong Central became quickly a perfect stage for the Foreign Domestic Helpers to make use of their rights to demonstrate. The rallies organised have become a regular political event on Sundays, and have led to several achievements regarding regulations on abode and employment of the female migrant workers. Chater Road has turned into an established stage for social and political issues related to contractual domestic work.

These political performances are visually and in particular acoustically well perceived from the ready-made urban pergolas around it: In search for protection against sun and rain, the female workers gather on the street under footbridges or in the public underpass, which links to the ferry pier as well as to the MTR station. The gatherings around these areas are of the urban spirit of see-and-to-be-seen, Philippine make-shift brasseries of which the atmosphere is composed of the mix of private chat, passers-by-watch and the certainty that their interests are fought for in audible distance.



**Figure 4** Chater Road and Statue Square and HSBC in Central, strategies of space occupation

## 2.2 Plaza

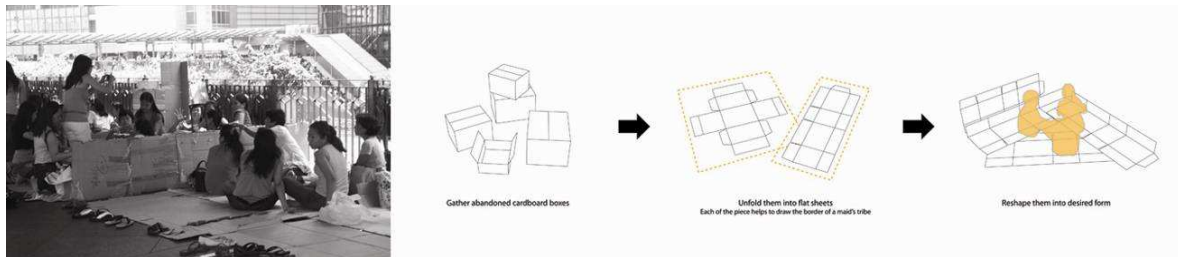
Started as the mark of a colonizer, the plaza has become a permanent fixture and organic element in towns and cities all over the Philippines. No Filipino community is complete without one. It evolves over the passage of time, developing according to the temperament of the populace, whether it is socio-cultural, religious, political or even economic. It is not only an open space where many people converge but also a setting for numerous other activities<sup>18</sup>.

For Hong Kong culture the word plaza still carries the idea of a gathering place, but the variety in nature of the activities taking place as well as its “public” character are most doubtful: As many shopping malls are named “plaza” - *Central Plaza, Harbour Plaza, Lee Theatre Plaza, City Plaza*, to name but a few -, the meaning of the term has transformed from the typology of an open democratic space into an enclosed atrium entirely dedicated to shopping, of which the perceivable congregating character is not achieved by people gathering on its ground, but shoppers constantly moving along its inner facade. For Foreign Domestic Helpers these temples of consumption are not very attractive, as both, architecture and security guards cater for “sitting” always coming in a set with “consuming”, which for the maids is simply not affordable. Then again, due to their own cultural imprint, the Filipinas were well prepared to discover the “plaza-qualities” of the series of open areas emerging around statue square in the eighties for their communal needs. The open sloping ground floor of the HSBC building receives the densest occupation each Sunday: the architectural masterpiece not only impresses by its technical achievements at the time of construction, it also takes the idea of an urban plaza to another level of scale and socio-cultural meaning for the contemporary city: with its 47.85m free span, the building provides an area of approximately 2.400 square meters protected from sun and rain, therefore effectively offers a *place* to a population floating in the city on a once a week base.

## 2.3 Village

The system of Elevated Walkways in Central offers shaded and weather protected spaces with a certain degree of privacy in comparison to the occupied open areas on the street level. As opposed to the

mass-flocking under HSBC Bank, the Filipinas gathering in the walkway spaces already takes a different shape due to the linearity of the bridges, which is further emphasized since narrowed by the split into the conquered area and the space left for circulation. The occupied zone is further partitioned into small compartments, formed by the up folded sides of large cardboard boxes, of which the bottoms also serve as sitting mat. This zoning enterprise is rather of a symbolic nature: as the partitions are 30-40 cm tall only, they are more indicative than physically effective. Nevertheless from a passers-by point of view these areas become more private, they become small spaces, and through the repetitive application of the same simple strategy for cell-forming, it seems that the resulting linear village as a whole gains the appeal of a coherent community and therefore demarcates itself more strongly from the zone used by pedestrians.



**Figure 6** Central Elevated Walkway: Philippine Village, strategies of space occupation

The regular appropriation of parks, streets, and flyovers leads to a radical transformation of the urban space and even has reached the iconic status of a tourist attraction. For the maids these weekly gatherings are the only opportunity for social exchange, mutual support and cultural expression.

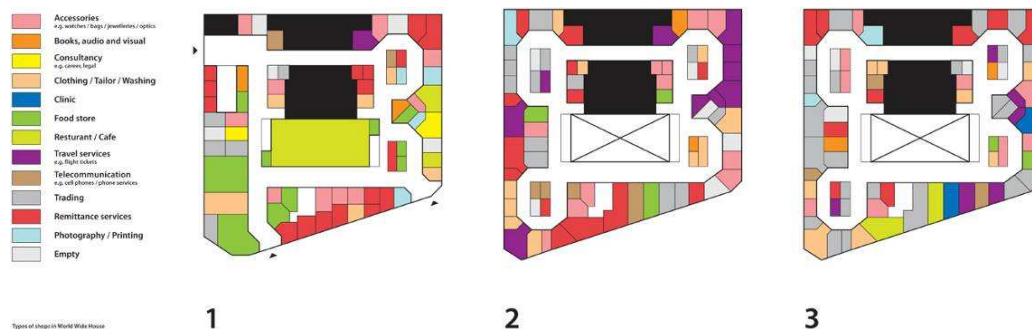
#### 4 SERVING SERVICE SPACE

By the majority Filipinas belong to the Roman-Catholic church. Many of the women find consolation and strength in their faith during their stay in Hong Kong, one of the places offering guidance being the Catholic Centre in Central, which is situated closed to the elevated walkway system. Sunday services are held on the 3/F of the tower, on the 18/F there is a Pastoral Centre, which offers space for discussion, education and events organized by diverse groups. Its main mission is providing advice and help for domestic workers who have a case with their employer, as well as arranging a place in one of the shelters for women after the termination of their contract, when they have nowhere else to go.

World Wide Tower is situated in immediate vicinity of the Catholic Centre. The building was accomplished in 1980 by Cheung Kong Properties on a much contested site in Central, formerly occupied by the General Post Office. The first three floors above ground form a shopping mall, which, due to its renting policy, allows individual shopkeepers to rent a small space to run their businesses, leading to a mixture of various shops offering a wide range of cheap products. With the increasing immigration of domestic helpers from the Philippines and their discovery of Central's open spaces for their gatherings, over time World Wide House slowly transformed into a shopping arcade with a focus on needs of Philippine domestic helpers, forming the largest service space for this group of servants in Hong Kong.

World Wide House is clearly not a leisure destination. The place is fully packed with women queuing to send money home or to receive consultancy, getting purchases done or having a quick meal. If not out of curiosity and a spirit of tourism, no Chinese or "Expat" would enter or even know about the Arcade. If such "stranger" still happens to enter, the spontaneous first impression will most likely be "I'm not in Hong Kong"; and it seems that this view is shared by both sides: visiting one of the restaurants on the third floor, I was warmly welcomed, all by being treated as a rare guest.





**Figure 7** World Wide House Shopping Arcade: schematic plan showing services / goods offered

Around 19% of the shops are rented by remittance services. Together with travel services (17%), and telecommunication (8%), almost half of the businesses in World Wide Plaza are about establishing a connection back to the Philippines. The money sent to the home country is mostly dedicated to pay for education and daily needs for siblings, children, and as support for parents. After having covered these expenses, further available money would be invested in agricultural land or a house back in the Philippines. This weekly routine is not just one of some errands to run on a Sunday – at this point the Foreign Domestic Helper connects back with her family, this very moment gives her the justification for being in Hong Kong, and the foundation for her imagination of a better future – with good education, and space and land of her own.

World Wide House and the Catholic Centre form enclaves within Hong Kong’s urban reality. For Filipinas they represent important interfaces to organize their abode in Hong Kong, to find support, and to connect back to their lives and loved ones back in the Philippines.

#### 4 URBAN CULTURE REVISITED

In a society situation where use of public space becomes more and more a matter of interest and choice, the quality of the spaces becomes a crucial factor for the death or life of modern cities.<sup>19</sup>

As specialists in domestic service, female migrant workers contribute more than HK\$ 13.7 billion annually to Hong Kong’s economy following an estimation of the Asian Migrant Centre<sup>20</sup>. Over three decades, these women have reinvented the city to substitute their “home” and by appropriation established a spatial network to foster their practical, emotional and cultural needs. The maids not only form a backbone of Hong Kong’s social and economic life: Through their forced exhibitionism they provoke a disruption of the spatial segregation and the related emerging monoculture, which has taken place through urban development in the past thirty years. The impressive scale of this event, its acoustic and visual vitality render life and soul to optimized city spaces, some of which would otherwise be dead on Sundays.

The gatherings of foreign domestic workers in Central are an example of a produced space based on culture, tradition and rituals, which obviously is stronger than the suggested behaviour implied by the existing spatial setup. Out of an urgency and due to the lack of alternatives, the weekly inhabitation imposes itself onto a space which deliberately but unsuccessfully tries to avoid such. The resulting transformation of the space as a collage of built economic glamour and colourful tribal picnic is as fascinating and shocking at the same time – true lived urbanity – and finds its peak (acuity, stridency, focus) every Sunday in the contrasty scene of the HSBC headquarters floating above a lively swarm of twittering Filipinas, where the global and the local, private and public, space of representation and Service Space can be captured in one single image frame.

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- <sup>8</sup> Stephen W.K.Chiu, “A Stranger in the House. Foreign Domestic Helpers in Hong Kong”, Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, 2005, p.10
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, p.12
- <sup>10</sup> Interview by the author, Sept, 6<sup>th</sup>, 2009, St. Paul’s Convent, Hong Kong (name of interlocutor changed)
- <sup>11</sup> “Employment Contract”, from: “Practical Guide For Employment of foreign domestic helpers – What foreign domestic helpers and their employers should know”, Hong Kong: Labour Department 2009, p.26
- <sup>12</sup> Interview by the author, Sept, 6<sup>th</sup>, 2009, St. Paul’s Convent, Hong Kong (name of interlocutor changed)
- <sup>13</sup> William Smith (ed.), “Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities”, Boston: C. Little, and J. Brown, 1870, p. 519
- <sup>14</sup> Jan Gehl, “Public Spaces for a Changing Public Life”, in: *Topos*, Ed 61/2007. “Urban Space”, Callwey, Munich, 2007, p.16
- <sup>15</sup> Lisa Law, “Defying Disappearance: Cosmopolitan Public Spaces in Hong Kong”, in: *Urban Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 9, 2002, p.1630
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p.1635
- <sup>17</sup> Stephen W.K.Chiu, “A Stranger in the House. Foreign Domestic Helpers in Hong Kong”, p.17-20
- <sup>18</sup> Norma I. Alarcon, “The Roles of the Plaza: The Philippine Experience”, in: Pu Miao (ed.), “Public Places in Asia Pacific Cities: Current Issues and Strategies”, Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers 2001, p.87
- <sup>19</sup> Jan Gehl, ‘Public Spaces for a Changing Public Life’, p.16
- <sup>20</sup> Stephen W.K.Chiu, “A Stranger in the House. Foreign Domestic Helpers in Hong Kong”, p.9