The West Kowloon Stories – Place making with Site Specific Features and Arts

by Sau Wai Tai

Everything can tell a story, if we are willing to listen and are willing to give them room to speak.

Introduction

The intention of writing this paper is an attempt to call attention to the local stories/histories in and around the area of West Kowloon Cultural District – stories/stories about the humans and the more-than-humans communities of the place. It is hope that the eventually built West Kowloon would be a place that the people could find a sense of place as they made connections with actors/community members of these stories as these stayed alive and lived on. The stories picked are trying to tell tales about the building and the reclaimed land, the element water and the place's ecological history, the Boat School and its services and the jute-line of time about the place in general. Instead of doing these narratives using speech, I am suggesting that they be done through visual means so that people could interact with them in real space and have more senses activated through the process.

Being a returnee just back to Hong Kong, I have only limited knowledge of the place. Yet I would still hope my perspective would be considered, with a view that West Kowloon Cultural District not be *teaching* individualism and ignorance like many other places as pointed out by a US educator and environmentalist, David Orr.[1] To Orr, too many places are only creating a sense of placelessness – void of history, locality, or community for people to make connections. After all, culture is about a place and its people. The proposed items are attempts to see if they could be elements to help make this West Kowloon Cultural District a place through site specific *arts and structures which could tell the place's stories.*

1. Revealing the Building Stories of the Place

Building materials and other resources can tell us a lot about us and about them, these stories can be exposed as we answer questions like: How a place was built? What materials were used? Where did those materials come from? Who decided how it should be built? How is it run? More importantly, to Orr, the question: ***Did the processes leave any ugliness behind?***   Since West Kowloon Cultural District's story

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[1] David Orr, Environmental Literacy, SUNY Press, 1991.

began below the sea-level, this is also where the exploration begins:

1.1 The Reclamation Garden *(Drawing 1)*

Numerous columns of the land-making materials used for constructing the place are extracted/cored and then treated/reinforced to achieve a desired degree of sturdiness. They are then erected to let people see their layers and what are they made of. Alternatively they can be contained in strong transparent tubes to give extra protection and aesthetics to the columns. The hollows
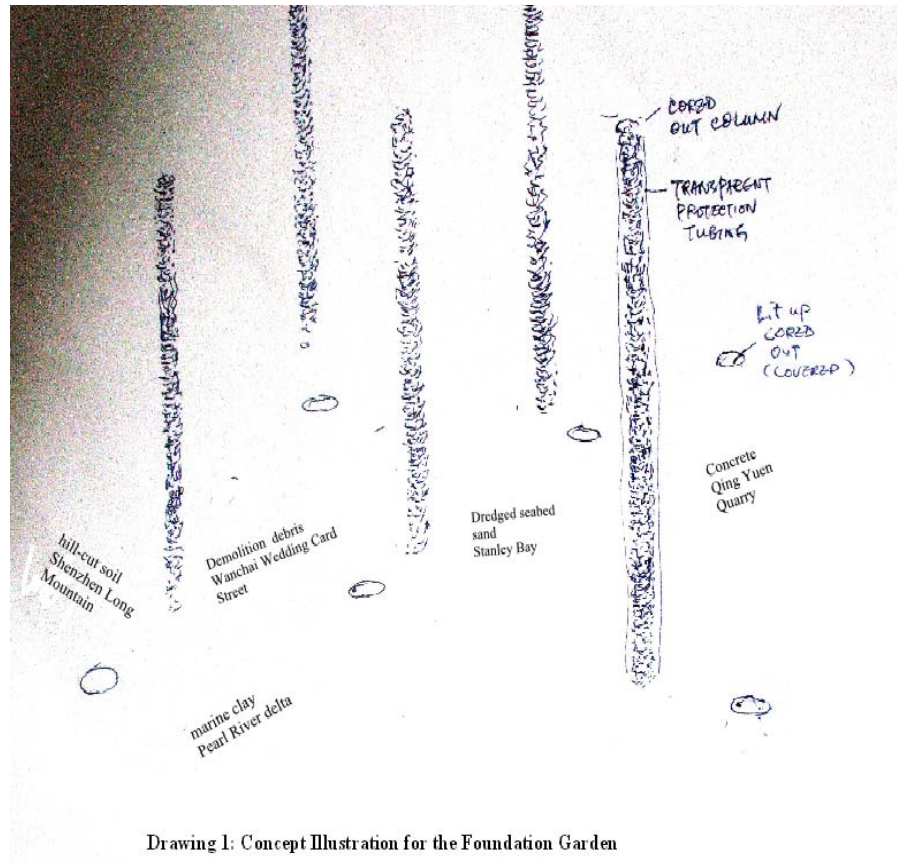
Drawing 1: Concept Illustration for the Foundation Garden

left behind are also treated/stabilized, covered with a transparent lid and lit up with power supplied by nearby solar connections. On the ground are words of white metal inlay reporting what materials of the reclamation had used and their places of origin.

1.2 The Buildings' Stories

Along the line of story-telling and buildings - buildings can carry labels/illustrations to tell their visitors/dwellers about themselves: including the matters and processes involved in the creation, construction and the functioning of these buildings. Since these buildings are yet to be design/constructed, it is hoped that there would only be good stories that reflected all things were done in the spirit of community, about nature and about the human kind.

2. Tales of the Waters

West Kowloon Cultural District is by the water. This marked its eco-sensitivity and importance. Both the visiting and dwelling population can create ecological pressure by generating grey and storm water. Technology can alleviate part of the pressure on site by channeling the soiled water away and for the grey-water, to be cleansed elsewhere. Yet, it is done not without cost: both the channeling and cleansing processes require energy; the hidden technological paths are also taking our eco-consciousness away and are teaching ignorance as we are disconnected with the processes.   Thus, I am suggesting to include a series of connected water features to make visible these processes and bring on better effects –a series of grey-water ponds and artificial wetland to telltale the water stories and to recreate places for the local aquatic flora and fauna at the same time.

2.1 Grey Water and Retention Ponds – Cleansing the water and bringing the local ecological history back to life

Well designed grey-water/retention ponds and wetlands can be both functional and aesthetically pleasing. By including these features and diverting part of the grey-water generated by the population on-site from entering the wastewater treatment system and/or the stormwater away from pouring to the sea can bring many ecological benefits. The sedimentation process at the grey-water retention pond together with the phyto-remediating power of native aquatic/semi-aquatic plants can help cleanse the polluted water without consuming resources, while returning a part of the West Kowloon Cultural District area to the native aquatic/semi-aquatic lives. By doing so, it will also bring the local ecological history of the place back to life.

Some of the water cleansed can also be used for watering the surround landscape, while some of it could continue flowing to the connected artificial wetland mimicking the shore before development once upon a time. The niche habitat so created together with the grey-water system could tell a good story about nature plus how West Kowloon Cultural District wades beyond the anthropocentric ways of seeing.

3. The Boat Schools – A reminder that we once received.

Hong Kong was once a refugee city of little means. Organizations from overseas rushed in to deliver emergency relief often after disasters struck in our recent history. Some stayed on to serve the needs of the place, including education for the children and

medical services for the sick. Some also tended to their perceived spiritual needs.[2] Boat Schools soon emerged to serve families living in house-boats. These boat-schools included Proclaiming Primary School (佈光小學) which docked at YauMaTei typhoon shelter during the 60s. It was found by the Oriental Horizon Christian Church (東方基督教會) and had provided education to over 2500 students over its course. Its enrollment peaked at the year 1964. .[3] There were also boat-schools operated by local charities. One renowned student of these boat schools was Mr. Fok Ying Dong (霍英東). He studied at one organized by the Junk Boat Operators Collective(*my poor translation*) (帆船同業義學)[4] Now all have come to pass as Hong Kong flourishes. While most of its citizens lived through tough times remember the kindness to become caring citizens, but there is also forgetfulness amongst the younger ones.[5]

The suggestion is to include a structure to tell this story of Hong Kong's vulnerable past. The below is one of the possible resolutions to abstractly represent the evolution of the local history – to have a stylized boat frame contained within an internationalist style building (a glass box which allows the interior to be seen.). The whole structure is to sit inside a rectangular pool of water.

Drawing 2: Conceptual representation of the boat school within an internatinalist style environment

Glass Outer

Pool and Water

Stylized boat frame (Part)

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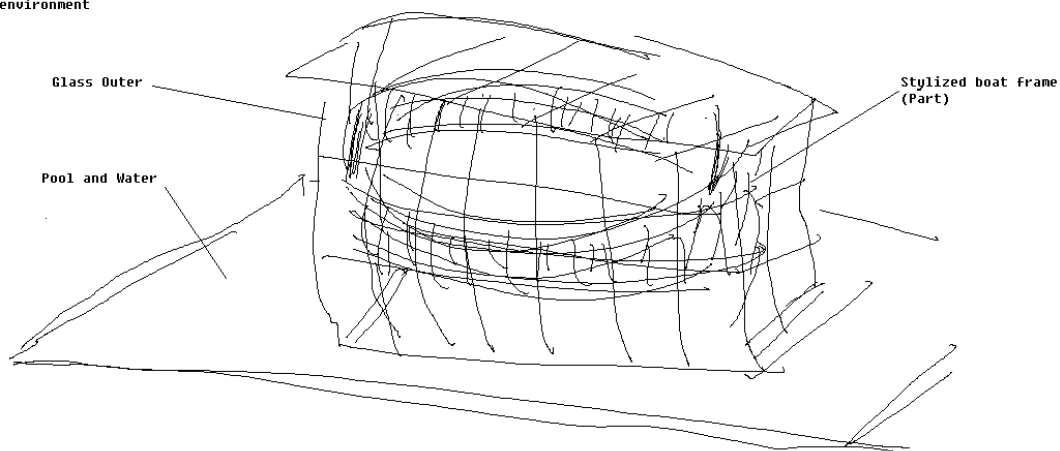
[2] The relationship of the place with Christianity and colonialism is complex, but the humanistic motives and impact of these organizations could hardly be discounted.

[3] 東方基督教會在香港堂的建立 http://www.horizon.org.hk/history/02.htm.

[4] 香港超级富豪霍英东的真实发家史 http://www.jpw.cn/businessx/19751a.htm 霍英東入讀的是說帆船同業義學。

[5] In 1991 when a major disaster hit Bangladesh in 1991, Hong Kong Government had not yet established a relief fund to support local relief organizations delivering help overseas. Because of the scale of the catastrophe, relief organizations in Hong Kong appealed to the Government for support and the funding requests were debated at the Financial Committee, Legco. The news went out. There were local politicians arguing against the motion and rebuked that the said money should be reserved for the local poor. A spokesperson an organization was confronted by one of such politicians in a radio programme,The debate came to rest only when the story about Hong Kong on the receiving end and how that related to Hong Kong's later development was brought up.

This is only an amateur idea for generating discussions and/or conceptual inclusion.

Inside the part of the boat frame: are exhibits about that era of Hong Kong's history[6] and also items connecting the past to the present, say, Hong Kong's active role in relief and poverty alleviation activities in Mainland China and overseas. It is desirable to include interactive elements for people to take part in the storytelling, say, an electronic journal for people to share their own stories and their responses to the exhibits.

Other areas of the boat could be used as an environmental art and education centre. Too many "natural" disasters the world is facing now are actually *manufactured"* - they are results of local environmental crises and/or global warming/climate chaos. This justifies the premises be used for the suggested to foster a critical understanding of our culture amongst the visitors in relation and the environment. The center could, thus, be fitted with studios for resident artists, especially environmental and community artists, and open studios for visitors, so that more stories could be created and told.

4. The Convoluted Time line – from the sea to West Kowloon Cultural District (Drawing 3)

This is a condensed conceptual drawing suggesting a time line meandering through the district or an area of the district. On the ground the time line is plotted with copper inlay. Marked on it are significant periods of this place to give an overall view of the evolution of the place as visitors walked down the line.
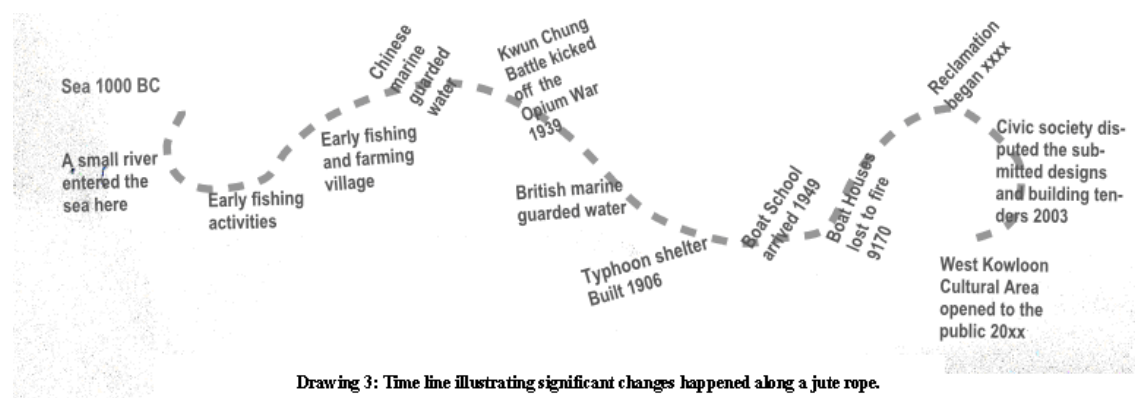
Drawing 3: Time line illustrating significant changes happened along a jute rope.

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[6] Some pictures of the boat school at YauMaTei might be available at **World Vision Hong Kong**. The organization had pictures of some of its sponsored children studying there then.