A Facelift and the Body: The Production of Space in Mui Wo

Kin-Ling TANG, The Chinese University of Hong Kong

Abstract

This article offers a critique of the government’s plan to give a ‘facelift’ to Mui Wo, Lantau Island, bringing forth two ‘moments of space,’ namely the ‘perceived’ and the ‘lived’ which, together with the ‘conceived’, presuppose the body, based on Lefebvre’s (1991) triadic concept of production of space. In modern society, the body no longer plays an important role in our perception of and relations with the world. Refuting body-mind dualism, this article explores how the body weaves our imagination and establishes our subjectivity, possessing the potential to call into question interchangeable, spectacular space. Using Lefebvre’s concept of spatial production, this article argues that bodily practices in the context of Mui Wo constitute a potential challenge to the hegemony of planned space.

Keywords
Body, development, global capitalism, space, subjectivity

摘要

本文審視香港政府「翻新」大嶼山梅窩的計劃，並據空間生產的三元概念（Lefebvre, 1991），帶出構思空間外的兩層要素，即感知與生活。此兩層空間元素強調身體的介入。本文駁拒身心二分論，並探討身體如何編織想像力、確立主體性。基於列斐伏爾的空間理論，本文的論點是，在梅窩的語境中，身體實踐有潛力挑戰規劃空間的霸權。

http://www.umac.mo/fsh/projections
The Production of Space

In this article, I discuss the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR) government’s plan to redevelop Mui Wo, Lantau, into a touristic site. I argue that this is another example of developmentalism, which makes space exchangeable and homogeneous. Using the triadic concept of space by Henri Lefebvre (1991), I show that lived experiences in Mui Wo cannot be taken over by conceived space, and that they have the potential to offer a response to the crisis of urban life, which is governed by boredom and abstraction.

As Lefebvre notes in his seminal work, *The Production of Space* (1991), each mode of production has its own particular space, and the shift from one mode to another results in the production of new space (1991, p.46). Without exception, capitalism and neocapitalism have produced their own space, which includes the ‘world of commodities,’ its ‘logic’ and its worldwide strategies, as well as the power of money and that of the political state (1991, p.53).

What matters in the present era of global capitalism, or finance capitalism, is the abstraction of money capital, which is a significant factor behind the use of space to extract surplus value and behind land speculation. Frederic Jameson is right to note that globalisation is not the emergence of a ‘globe’ as such, with a new and larger space replacing the older national or imperial ones. It is rather a kind of ‘cyberspace’ in which money capital has reached its ultimate dematerialisation, as messages which pass instantaneously from one nodal point to another across the former globe, the former material world (1998, p.153).

In discussing *The Long Twentieth Century* by Giovanni Arrighi (1994), Jameson notes the originality of Arrighi’s work lies in two moments of
deterritorialisation. One is a deterritorialisation in which capital shifts to other and more profitable forms of production, often in new geographical regions. Another, which is of particular interest to this study, involves the giving up of commodity production altogether by capital in an entire centre or region in order to seek maximisation in spaces of speculation, the money market, and finance capital (1998, p.153).

One cannot help but think of Hong Kong as an example of this development. In a post-industrial society such as Hong Kong’s where the rural is in peril, the crisis lies not in urbanisation, or ruralisation for that matter, for the urban as well as the rural is destroyed. To answer the hegemonic exigencies of capital in search of maximisation, the city has become homogeneous. This is a common feature of global cities in which abstract space proliferates and makes such cities look increasingly alike.

While the key to globalisation is ‘deterritorialisation’, it is not without irony that the privileged forms of speculation today are those of land and city space. As a result of ultimate deterritorialisation, land and the earth in global cities become abstract; from being the background or context of commodity exchange, they are transformed into a commodity in its own right (Jameson 1998, p.153). In this way, knowing how to build a physical structure is far from enough. Space has to be endowed with exchangeability and the real estate appraisal term of ‘comparables’ is a reflection of this prerequisite: to establish its market value, a property has to be comparable to some other properties in order to compare like with like, not apples with oranges. For space to become homogeneous and hence exchangeable, it has to possess certain traits. Residential spaces nowadays are ‘units,’ or identical cubes of space, but this sameness is precisely what makes them saleable. For many buyers the most important consideration is whether and how well the subject property can be (re)sold on the market, rather than how good it is as a place to live in. Similarly, a holiday resort has to offer a range of facilities (beach, hotels, shopping, etc.), without which it cannot be promoted as such in travel brochures. In the case of

http://www.umac.mo/fsh/projections
a retail mall, it has to have the right size, allocate its floor space to various trades in the optimal way, and have a certain tenant mix.

Moreover, it is not sufficient for space to simply possess certain traits in order to be called a holiday resort, for instance. More importantly, these traits have to be made known and carry a name. Hence, marketing of the product is more important than the product itself. Signs associated with space are becoming increasingly prominent as capitalists try to maximise the surplus value that can be generated, as illustrated by the extravagant names given to upmarket residential properties in Hong Kong in recent years, like ‘君臨天下,’ which literally means ‘The Monarch Descending onto Heaven and Earth,’ and ‘凱旋門’ or ‘Arc de Triomphe’.

Under government (state) planning, the Hong Kong cityscape is full of footbridges and walkways, which connect building to building, and bus stop to Mass Transit Railway (MTR) station, without the pedestrian ever needing to touch the ground. Many new buildings are mixed-use compounds with a retail podium raised a few floors from the ground, imposing their intimidating presence on people walking by. The flâneur(se) would find it more and more difficult to walk or even stay in the street. In modern space such as this, the organic body is absent. Our experience is fragmentary, without the feeling of being part of the cosmos. We do not even feel we are part of the physical environment—we are trained not to touch or we risk ‘sabotaging’ material things around us, and yet materialism is all around us. The body is alienated in modern space. In a sense, we are all crippled in modern society.

Nevertheless, as Lefebvre has noted, the lived and the body are primordial in space and cannot be reduced to the conceived. Neither can the body be reduced to a geometric or optical abstraction. On the contrary, the understanding of space must begin with the lived and the body, i.e., from a space occupied by an organic, living, and thinking being (2009, p.229).

In The Production of Space, Lefebvre (1991) discusses a conceptual triad of space. In brief, spatial practice (la pratique spatiale), or the perceived (perçu), embraces production and reproduction, and ensures continuity and
some degree of cohesion. In Hong Kong, for example, modern spatial practice can be defined by the daily life of a tenant in a government-subsidised high-rise housing project. Representations of space (*les représentations de l’espace*), or the conceived (*conçu*), refer to the space of scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers, and social engineers. They are the dominant spaces in any society. Representational space refers to space directly lived (*vécu*) through its associated images and symbols. It is the space of users and inhabitants. This is the dominated and passively experienced space that the imagination seeks to change and appropriate.

However, Lefebvre warns against treating this triad as an abstract ‘model,’ as this would eliminate the force that this perceived-conceived-lived trio can have (1991, p.40). Instead, the triad must grasp the concrete (not limited to the immediate), or else its implication would be rather limited, being reduced to merely another ‘ideological mediation.’ This qualification by Lefebvre is important. Instead of a structural model, the triad opens up the way to possibilities that are resistant to permanent constructions.

A ‘Facelift’

In late 2004, the Hong Kong SAR Government proposed a *Concept Plan for Lantau* to provide an overall planning framework for the future development of Lantau Island. Within the plan, Mui Wo was positioned as a rural, touristic, township for holidaymakers. Subsequently, the Planning Department drew up the *Land Use Concept Plans* (the *LUC Plans*) for the ‘facelift’ of Mui Wo in mid-2006. This is in effect a multi-million dollar plan to revamp the infrastructure of the place and to develop it into a touristic town. In view of the above discussions on the production of space, I see this as an example of making a lived space abstract in the name of ‘progress’ and ‘development’. Development in its predominant sense is understood here as the attempt to produce space to endow it with exchangeability, which implies homogeneity throughout. In the process of homogenisation, space is driven empty, cleared of lived experiences, often in the name of (bourgeois) aesthetics and order. The

http://www.umac.mo/fsh/projections
official name given by the government to this redevelopment plan—‘Facelift of Mui Wo’—epitomises the emphasis on the visual and the visual only.

According to Lefebvre, abstract space dissolves and incorporates such former ‘subjects’ as the village and the town (1991, p.51). It also replaces them. Abstract space presents itself as the space of power, which will eventually lead to its own dissolution on account of conflicts and contradictions arising within it. An apparent pseudo-subject will arise as a result, i.e., the abstract modern social space; hidden within it and concealed by its illusory transparency will be the real ‘subject,’ namely state power. Within this space, and on the subject of this space, everything is openly declared: everything is said or written. Yet, there is very little to be said and even less to be ‘lived,’ for lived experience is crushed. The ‘conceived’ will prevail. History is experienced as nostalgia, and nature as regret—as a horizon fast disappearing behind us. This is why affectivity, along with the sensory/sensual realm, cannot accede to abstract space. The Mui Wo ‘facelift’ plan is a typical example of how space is conceived and how lived experience is suppressed in the process. Behind town planning and the knowledge of professionals is also state power and its agenda to render space homogeneous, such that Mui Wo is endowed with the signs and symbols of a ‘touristic town.’

In June 2007, the Civil Engineering and Development Department (CEDD) commissioned Meinhardt Infrastructure and Environment, a consultancy firm, to conduct a feasibility study of the proposed works under the abovementioned LUC Plans. At the time of writing, another engineering consultant, Jacobs, has been commissioned by the CEDD to engage in detailed design of the project. At an estimated cost of over HK$300 million, the works involve the construction of new amenities and redevelopment of existing areas in the coming few years. These include redevelopment of the pier area, addition of signage for tourists, provision of a ‘heritage trail’, and a cycle track network. Works will start in 2013 upon completion of statutory procedures and funding approval (CEDD and Meinhardt 2012).
This facelift plan is part of the government’s larger plans to develop Lantau into a transport nodal point within the Pearl River Delta (PRD), especially with the construction of the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge, with Lantau Island being one of the future boundary crossing points. Due to the dialectical process of rapid urbanisation and the growing affluence of the PRD at large, natural resources have become scarce and have acquired exchange value. Spaces of ‘nature,’ with the necessary signs and symbols, have to be produced in order to realise the surplus value for capitalists. This is where expert knowledge comes into play in order to conceive such space. In this process, such professionals as planners, engineers, consultants from various fields (transport, landscaping, environment), as well as technocrats and bureaucrats from government, have been engaged. Their knowledge informs the conception of space, which is abstract and formal. With the support and authority of this positive knowledge, such conceived space in turn becomes dominant and prevails over the lived.

A prominent example concerns the daily practice of cycling in Mui Wo which is the main mode of transport within the community. According to the facelift plan, an underground bicycle park will be built at some distance away from the pier to replace the current one just beside it. This drew heavy criticism from some residents in the public forums as well as in their written comments, since it would compromise the daily, practical needs of cyclists. This example of the bicycle park illustrates the conflict between abstract space which emphasizes the visual and optical and lived space which is embodied and organic.

When the facelift proposal was still in the planning stage, I joined a small group of residents making a tour of Mui Wo together with the government town planner in charge of this project. I told him I found the bicycle park a prominent characteristic of Mui Wo but the planner did not agree. He did not think that the bicycle park constituted a special feature of Mui Wo, on the grounds that other new towns such as Shatin had similar bicycle parking spaces.
This view of the town planner somewhat surprised me until I realised the town planner and I were in fact speaking on two different planes. I spoke from bodily lived experiences (character), and the planner from the abstract and detached (visual, spectacular). By ‘bicycle park,’ I denoted everyday experiences of residents, myself included, through which many feelings and memories were conjured up. When the planner said the bicycle park had ‘nothing special’, he was adopting the blasé attitude of the metropolitan man (Simmel 1997, p.178) and was speaking from a distance, in search of the spectacle. He had the government agenda in mind: to develop Mui Wo into a touristic town, in which what counts are the associated symbols and signs. A mundane, everyday cycle park intended for local residents lacks the signs and symbols of a tourist town. It has only use value but not exchange value. It is not surprising then that in the eyes of the planner, it has ‘nothing special.’

In fact, the theme of the ‘facelift’ plan is ‘leisure historic rural township.’ As Adorno and Horkheimer have noted, under late capitalism, amusement is simply the prolongation of work. It is an escape from the mechanized work process, but not in the least permanently. On the contrary, the ultimate aim of amusement is to let workers recruit strength in order to be able to cope with work again (2002, p.137). This still has a certain truth in this context—‘recharge’ as a metaphor for holidaymaking is common among workers in Hong Kong. There is an assumption that the purpose of getting away from work is to let oneself be recharged with strength such that s/he can return to work in a better form.

The Body
In the production of space, the state becomes more and more clearly the agent, even the guiding hand (Lefebvre 2009, p.228). In what Lefebvre has qualified as the space of ‘state mode of production’ (SMP), it implies not only that everyday life is programmed and idealised through manipulated consumption but also that spatiality is hierarchized to distinguish noble spaces from vulgar ones, and residential spaces from other spaces. It also implies a bureaucratic
centrality, termed ‘civic’ (significantly, the plaza in Mui Wo Old Town is named ‘Civic Square’ in government planning documents) but occupied by the decision-making powers. It is a space organised in such a way that, unless they revolt, ‘users’ are reduced to passivity and silence (235).

Meanwhile, the capacity to lay the plan over the space of the city, to render its vision concrete in the built environment, is taken as a sign of the capacity of the modern state to penetrate and organise life in public (Wells 2007, p.140). In the LUC Plans drawn by government town planners, there is a proposal to ‘beautify’ the old town of Mui Wo: ‘The existing Old Town would be retained and enriched with traditional style streetlights and paving. The improvement of streetscape would cover Mui Wo Rural Committee Road, Mui Wo Chung Hau Street and the neighbouring streets’ (SKIDPD 2006, p.1-2).

Beauty is an aesthetic judgment that is in turn related to education and social origin. To Pierre Bourdieu, the ‘eye’ is a product of history reproduced by education and tastes function as markers of class (1984, pp.3-7). A popular aesthetic is based on the affirmation of the continuity between art and life, which implies the subordination of form to function. John Berger also notes that the predominant art of any period tends to serve the ideological interests of the ruling class (1972, p.86). To clear objects which form part and parcel of life from social space by saying they are ‘ugly’ (in the case of the bicycle park, because the bicycles there are said to be disorderly and off-putting to tourists), and to allow (or install) objects which are detached from life in public space by saying they are ‘beautiful’ or ‘beautifying,’ is to negate lived, bodily experiences using an eye detached from daily life. As such, building an ‘entrance plaza’ at the pier to serve tourists, replacing the bicycle park intended for residents, will change the everyday life of residents forever.

As John Urry has noted, mere sightseeing can be an embarrassment (2002). Given the emphasis on tourist consumption as visual, and given the universalisation of the tourist gaze, places have come to construct themselves as objects of such gaze. At the same time, the gaze of the tourist will involve an intrusion into people’s lives. In the case of the facelift plan of Mui Wo, such
universalisation of the tourist gaze is reflected in the fact that the mere sightseeing tourist is going to pre-empt the daily need of residents. In this way, sight may be viewed as the most superficial of the senses, getting in the way of real experiences that should involve the other senses and necessitate long periods of time in order to achieve proper immersion in the space.

Moreover, to mark its symbols of rule, the government is tempted to construct monuments and memorials in public spaces, but often this is met with a failure to impress the significance of these symbols on the population (Wells 2007, p.139). To this, I would add that pro-establishment agents are often no less eager than the government itself to impress the public with state rule. The proposed installation of a ‘Silver Bauhinia’ statue, and the setting up of an ‘Olympic trail’ are such examples of the introduction of state presence. The suggestion to build a Silver Bauhinia statue, reminiscent of the Golden Bauhinia statue in Wanchai, as a ‘landmark’ in the town square of Mui Wo, is understood to have come from the Rural Committee of Mui Wo. At the consultation forum organised by the government on 18 November 2006, a number of residents voiced their opposition to this installation. In response, planning bureaucrats said this was a proposal raised by the Rural Committee. I understand this as a self-protective response by bureaucrats who did not want to get embroiled in the polemics surrounding a proposal that was not raised by them in the first place.²

The Golden Bauhinia statue is closely associated with the resumption of sovereign power over Hong Kong by the Chinese government. It is a gift from the Central government to Hong Kong to mark the handover. The daily flag-hoisting ceremony is held at the Golden Bauhinia Square. It is also a must-see spot for tour groups from mainland China. The Rural Committee of Mui Wo might have wanted a Silver Bauhinia statue to draw visitors, and/or to show its allegiance to Beijing. Whatever its motives are, such a statue will have the effect of impressing the public with state power. Even without a statue (yet), the name ‘Silver Bauhinia Square’ (which has appeared in some leaflets promoting activities held by the Committee) would achieve the same effect.
Subsequently, in the run-up to the Beijing Olympics in August 2008, a series of ‘road signs’—in effect an identical set of structures with the Olympic rings and the words ‘This way to Hong Kong Olympic Trail’—were erected in a number of places across Mui Wo. The Beijing Olympics was an opportunity seized by the Chinese government to demonstrate its position as a rising power on the world stage. In the context of Hong Kong, showing support for the Beijing Olympics was a way to represent one’s allegiance to the Central government. Like the eventual installation of a Silver Bauhinia statue, the Olympic road signs attempt to impress the public with government authority. However, as discussed above, such efforts to erect structures in public spaces often meet with the failure to impress the significance of these symbols on the local population. To local residents, these signs have been parachuted in overnight and are totally unrelated to local spaces and lived experiences. Upon seeing one of the Olympic road signs, a friend of mine visiting Mui Wo was bemused and said to me: ‘What has the Olympics got to do with Mui Wo? ... It is not related to the place.’ In fact, the same signs can be placed anywhere—from the bustling streets of Mongkok to upscale malls in Central—but at the same time they point to nowhere. The sign is a representation of the mediated ‘Beijing Olympics 2008,’ and is not related to the history or memory of any place—not even Beijing as a living place for Beijing residents—and fails to generate any emotional or rational sense among local inhabitants.

According to the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard, it is through a sort of poetic process that space acquires sense for us. In *The Poetics of Space*, Bachelard argues that it is not enough to consider a house as an ‘object’ on which we can make our judgments and daydreams react (1969, p.6). Through a poetic process, the objective space of a house—its corners, attic, rooms, cellar—harbours our daydreams and imagination. The house is one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories, and dreams of mankind. If we extend this understanding of dwelling place to the entirety of Mui Wo, any corner of the place can constitute a space of intimacy, housing our dreams and memory—a chair under the tree, a water tank in the field, or a
‘snowman’ in the labyrinth of houses. Between friends and family, many residents have an intimate name for places where they have their proper memories and experiences.

When the *LUC Plans* (SKIDPD, 2006) were presented at consultation forums for residents with their proper scales, graphic representations, curves and lines, some residents found it hard to relate them to the place that they know and live in. In daily life, residents refer to various spots not so much by official names or addresses, but rather by the plants and trees nearby, geographical features, shops, houses of people whom they know (e.g. where Granny Ho lived), or activities (e.g. where Mr Mok sold his tofu dessert). Many visitors to Mui Wo navigate the place through memories or by asking their way from local residents. Even long-time residents can easily get lost in the labyrinth of houses in a neighbouring village if they only know the house number, as the numbering does not appear in chronological order. This lack of ‘order’ actually helps to create human contact among neighbours and strangers alike. Dialectically, it also creates order of some sort in the place—outsiders to the village are obliged to ask their way and residents feel obliged to converse with any stranger in the village, whether to offer help or as a measure of precaution.

The poetics of space also leads to action: ‘Space calls for action, and before action, the imagination is at work. It mows and ploughs’ (Bachelard 1969, p.12). Note that Bachelard’s language here is inspired by farming and gardening activity—a kind of bodily practice and experience in space. As the body mows the grass and ploughs the soil, our dreams and thoughts crisscross and we are engaged in a sort of self-dialogue. We also become critical of ourselves and of what we do. In turn, such dialogue gives rise to further action. Here, body movements in and traversing space are not divorced from thoughts; instead they go together.

Similarly, in his work *The Craftsman* (2008) discussing the ‘human animal at work,’ Richard Sennett contends that there is an intimate connection between hand and head, contesting the modern notion that hand and head are
divided. According to Sennett, every good crafts(wo)man conducts a dialogue between concrete practices and thinking. Modern education avoids repetition as mind-numbing, but the author thinks there is nothing mindlessly mechanical about technique itself (2008). On the contrary, Sennett argues, going over an action again and again enables self-criticism.

The image of mowing and ploughing mentioned in Bachelard’s discussion is also meaningful—cutting grass and preparing the fields are actions in anticipation of new beginnings, as powered by our imagination and daydreaming. The mainstream culture tends to regard this duo of imagination and daydreaming as unproductive, yet here imagination is compared to bodily activities that signify the arrival of new life. As in the case of the sowing of seeds, we never know if anything will ever come out of it, but no truly new beginning is possible without this act.

In my own bodily experience in the garden, working with all the garden tools, ploughing soil and sowing seeds, touching the plants and the soil with my own hands, I find that I am also having a dialogue with my own self. Quite miraculously, this process tells me who I am. I am like the seeds that I sow on the soil — reaching back to my own inner core, absorbing water and nutrients, and braving the weather, as the preconditions for becoming a being in the world. I become more sensitive to my own body, trying to feel its inner states. Quite amazingly, if you are willing to listen, your body has a lot to tell you about who you are.

In describing my own bodily experience in the garden, I try to reflect on one important epiphany: re-discovery of the body. In modern society, the reign of functionalism and rationalism has led to the division of mind and body. Our body becomes numb, and our sensory organs lose sensitivity. Born and bred in a modern metropolis, I am no exception to this phenomenon. As Simmel has noted, metropolitan life underlies a predominance of intelligence in metropolitan man, who reacts with his head instead of heart, whereas rural and small town life rests more upon deeply felt and emotional relationships (1997,
pp.175-76). The reaction to metropolitan phenomena is shifted to the intellect, which is least sensitive and quite remote from the depth of the personality.

Conclusion
In this article, using the case of Mui Wo and taking a cue from the triadic concept of production of space (Lefebvre 1991), I have tried to evoke the body as a site to contest abstract space produced in response to the exigencies of global capitalism. Maurice Merleau-Ponty saw bodies as sites for subjectivity and consciousness, and rejected the idea that they could be seen exclusively as objects. The body constitutes our ‘vehicle of being in’ the world and provides us with a point of view on and situated experience of our environment. Far from being given in advance of our existence, Merleau-Ponty suggested that the structure and meaning of the world and the integrity of objects are ‘achieved through the medium of body experience’ (Merleau-Ponty 1962; Shilling 2005, p.54-56).

The body has an enormous potential. Putting our discussions in the context of space, in the face of dominated space, the body takes its revenge—or at least calls for revenge. Lefebvre considered the body as a differential field, thanks to its sensory organs, from the sense of smell and from sexuality to sight—without any special emphasis being placed on the visual sphere. In other words, it behaves as a total body, breaking out of the temporal and spatial shell developed in response to labour, to the division of labour, to the localizing of work, and the specialization of places (Lefebvre 1991, p.384). The above discussions on the case of Mui Wo show that in a modern, global metropolis where the body is alienated in the midst of abstract space, bodily practices in a rural setting constitute a heterogeneous space that informs our subjectivity. Such space, in turn, can be the site of revolt against interchangeable, spectacular space.

Notes

http://www.umac.mo/fsh/projections
1. In an e-mail message to the Planning Department on 22 June 2008, Sally Chun, a Mui Wo resident, wrote that she ‘cannot accept the idea’ of an underground parking area. In her opinion, ‘the proposal is based more on the aim of getting the bicycles out of sight instead of respecting cycling as the way of life in Mui Wo. The primary aim (of a bicycle park) should be providing user-friendly parking to the residents.’

2. The consultation report published in June 2007 acknowledged ‘there were mixed views on the landmark feature to be placed in the Square’ (SKIDPD 2008, p.2). There was no further indication of a ‘Possible Silver Bauhinia Statue’ in the Consultation Digest distributed at the public forum on 31 May 2008 (CEDD and Meinhardt 2008). However, when clarification was sought from the planners attending the forum about the status of the statue plan, no definite answer was provided.

3. I had lived in a small village of about twenty houses for three years. Due to exposed wires, internet services broke down at an average rate of about once every two months. The repairmen, who are all local residents themselves, never managed to find my house by looking at the address alone and needed to call to ask for exact location on every visit.

References

Civil Engineering and Development Department (CEDD) (2012) Improvement works for Mui Wo Facelift. Online documents at URL http://www.umac.mo/fsh/projections


http://www.umac.mo/fsh/projections