

Hong Kong Composite Buildings: Modern Architectural Heritage of the 1950s and 1960s 香港一九五、六十年代的商住大廈

A lecture based on the essay “Corner Delight: Hong Kong Composite Buildings of the 1950s and 1960s”
by **Lee Ho Yin** and **Lynne DiStefano**, in the book *Corner Houses* (2010) by photographer Michael Wolf

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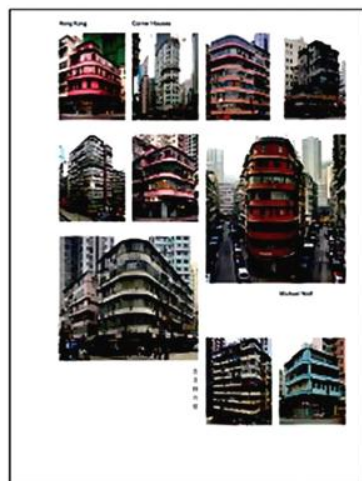
Hong Kong Corner Houses

街頭街尾

Michael Wolf

In *Hong Kong Corner Houses*, the internationally renowned German photographer **Michael Wolf** continues with his visual quest for the overlooked and underappreciated urban phenomena that give a city its special character. This time, he draws attention to Hong Kong's urban corners and buildings that are often inconspicuous amid the high-rise, high-density urban clutter of Hong Kong. These ordinary residential-commercial buildings of '50s and '60s vintage represent the expression of local Chinese pragmatism and expediency in the economic austerity of early postwar decades. The photographic presentation captures the inherent paradoxes of their architectural character: the quiet prominence, attractive banality, and tectonic chaos that give urban Hong Kong its endearing quality. Complementing the superb photographs by Michael Wolf, *Hong Kong Corner Houses* features an essay and extended captions by two of Hong Kong's best-known academics in the field of architectural conservation, Drs. Lynne DiStefano and Lee Ho Yin.

在《街頭街尾》這本書中，國際聞名的德國攝影師 Michael Wolf 再次運用他的視覺來尋覓一些常被忽略和忽視的城市現象。他令讀者重新發現了隱匿在香港高樓林立市區中的街頭街尾建築。《街頭街尾》的建築物都是五、六十年代的商住大廈，它們的設計反映了香港華人在戰後的艱難條件下所表現的務實主義和權宜之計。攝影師捕捉了這類建築物其貌不揚中的份外顯眼，平平無奇中的別具吸引，和混雜無章中的生氣勃勃。這些充滿矛盾的特點就正是香港市貌最引人入勝之處。本書亦有幸邀請了香港大學著名的建築文物保護學者李浩然博士（Lee Ho Yin）與狄麗珍博士（Lynne DiStefano），為《街頭街尾》執筆文章，道出與攝影主題的學術對話。香港大學特別呈獻上此本與 Michael Wolf 首次合作的攝影藝術收藏本兼學術參考佳作。



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October 2010
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illus., bilingual in English & Chinese
HB ISBN 978-968-8028-72-6 HK\$250



Hong Kong University Press Fall • Winter 2010

What is so special about “Composite Buildings”?

“... the rich mix of residential and commercial activities on its upper floors is revealed through a multitude of exterior tell-tale signs—domestic laundry hanging out to dry, business signage prominently displayed and a wide range of window treatments. All of these make a Corner House particularly fascinating to look at, and such a voyeuristic fascination is apparent when looking at the collection of photographs [of Composite Buildings] in this book. Each image makes your eyes wander, dashing from window to window, in search of clues that will lead to the realization—or imagination—of what is happening behind the façade.”

**Excerpt from the essay “Corner Delight: Hong Kong Composite Buildings of the 1950s and 1960s”
by Lee Ho Yin and Lynne DiStefano, in *Hong Kong Corner Houses* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010)**

Mei Wah Building, Wan Chai (1963)



Peony House, West Block, Tai Kok Tsui (1961)



What are “Composite Buildings”?

Composite Buildings 綜合用途建築物

Defined in Hong Kong's *Buildings Ordinance* as buildings that are “partly domestic and partly non-domestic.”

Character-defining Elements (related to the tangible – the architecture)

- Multi-storey buildings built in the 1950s and 1960s
- Early Modernism / Modernist / International Style / “Bauhaus” architecture
- Development intensity controlled by buildable volume

Character-defining Elements (related to the intangible – the use)

- Designed for mixed use - shops on the ground floor and in the cockloft; residential units on upper floors
- Residential units on the upper floors that can also be used for a variety of production- or service-based home businesses

Multi-storey buildings built in the 1950s and 1960s

Wanchai House, Wan Chai (1959)



Mei Wah Building, Wan Chai (1963)



Early Modernism / Modernist / International Style / “Bauhaus” architecture

Le Corbusier’s Villa Savoye, Poissy, France (1929)



Erich Mendelsohn’s De La Warr Pavilion, Sussex, UK (1935)



Early Modernism / Modernist / International Style / “Bauhaus” architecture

475A Fuk Wah St , Chuen Sha Wan (1959)



Sloane Avenue Mansions, Chelsea, London (1934)



Early Modernism / Modernist / International Style / “Bauhaus” architecture

Kam Wa Building, Shau Kei Wan, Hong Kong (1964)



Chelsea House, Chelsea, London (1935)



Early Modernism / Modernist / International Style / “Bauhaus” architecture

Peony House, Mong Kok (1961)



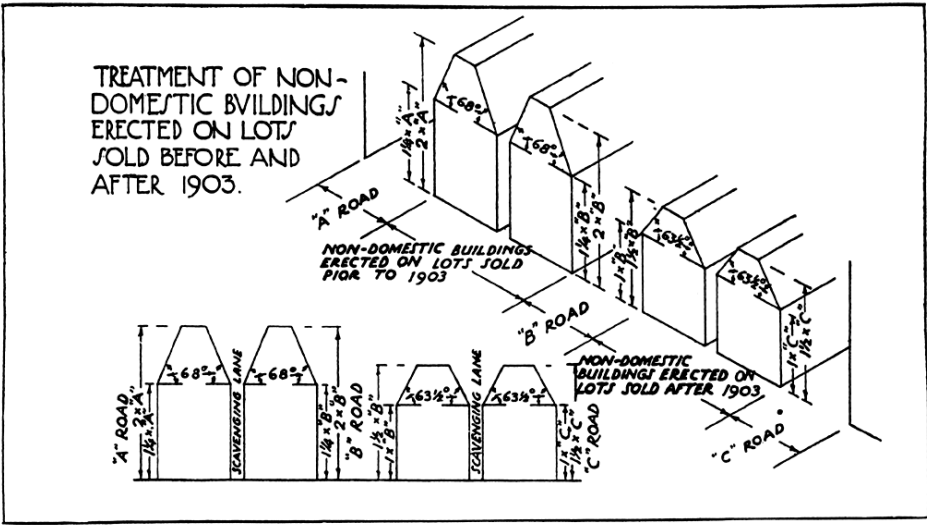
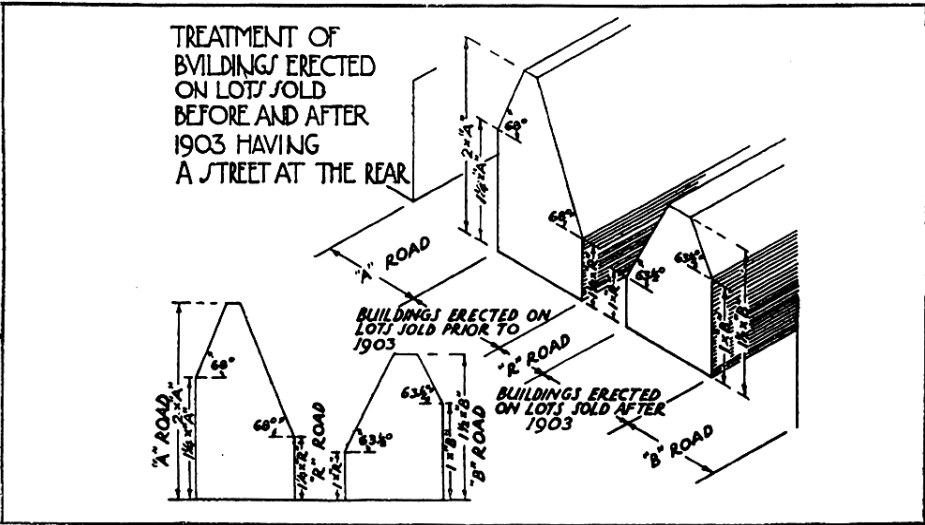
Image: Michael Wolf

Residential block in La Habana (1950s?), Cuba



Image: Nick Cooperman

Development intensity 發展密度 controlled by buildable volume: 允可建築體積

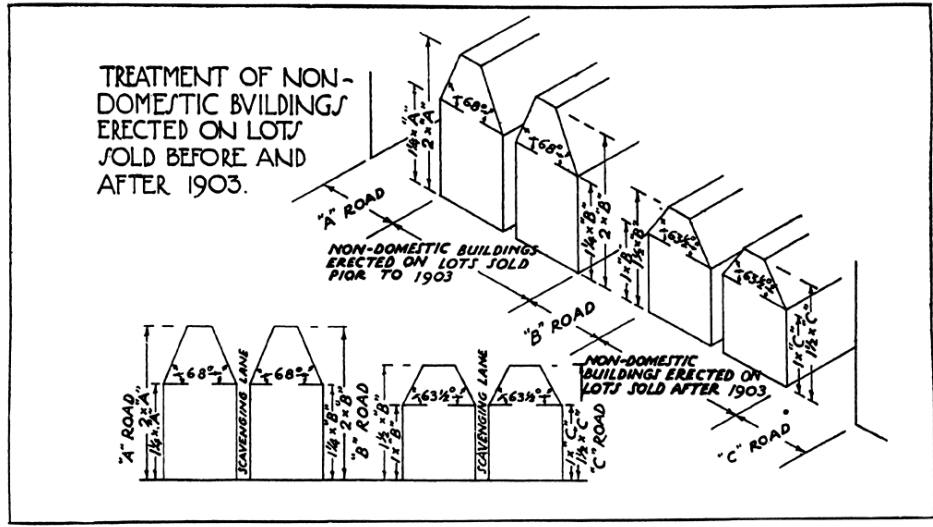
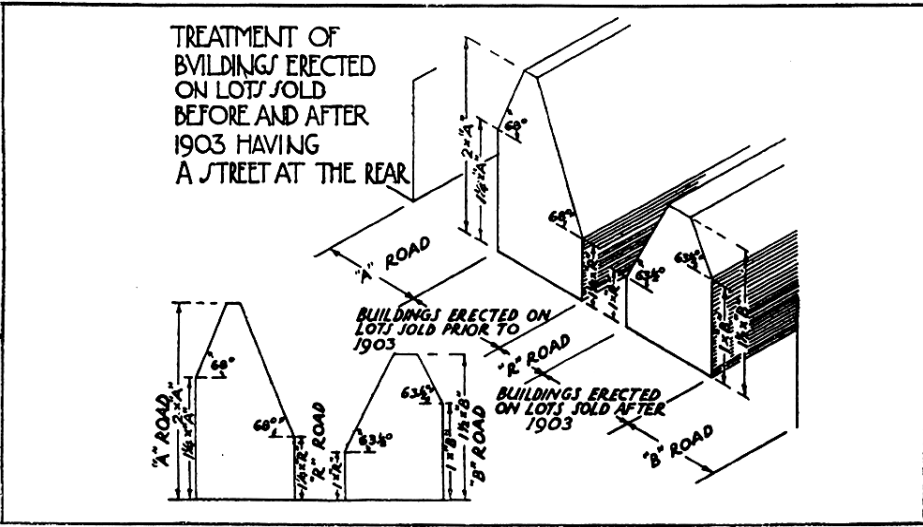


Images: Hong Kong Buildings Department



Images: Information Services Department

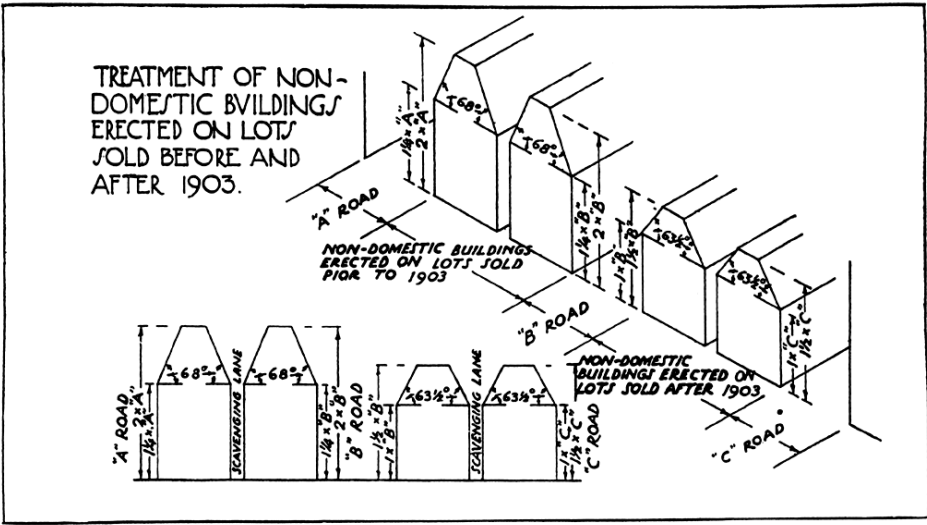
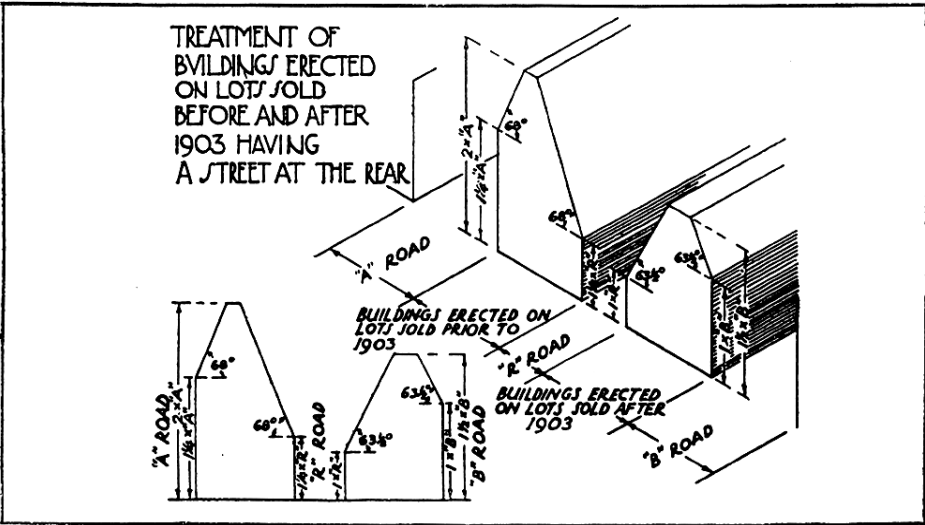
Development intensity controlled by buildable volume: The potential for "canyon effect"



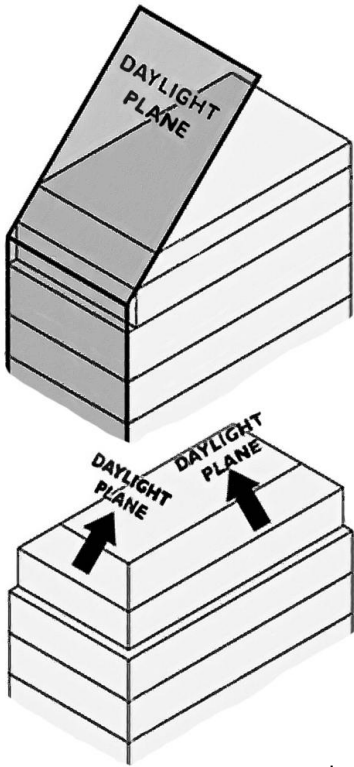
Images: Hong Kong Buildings Department



Development intensity controlled by buildable volume: daylight angle 日光角度



Images: Hong Kong Buildings Department



Images: Lee Ho Yin

Composite Buildings 綜合用途建築物

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- Designed for mixed use - shops on the ground floor and in the cockloft; residential units on upper floors
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Residential units on the upper floors that can also be used for a variety of production- or service-based home businesses



Residential units on the upper floors that can also be used for a variety of production- or service-based home businesses



Historical circumstances that led to the creation of Composite Buildings

1. Communist liberation of China in 1949 → influx of Chinese refugees to Hong Kong
2. Outbreak of the Korean War in 1950 → Hong Kong suffered from the import-export embargo on China

“The outbreak of war in Korea in 1950 quickly led to a marked decline in the Colony’s traditional entrepôt trade. It has therefore become increasingly important that local industry should be encouraged and that new products and new markets should be developed, in order to provide employment for a population which, already seriously crowded, is increasing by more than 50,000 each year.”

Hong Kong Annual Report 1954, chapter on “Production and Marketing,” p. 75.



紧跟毛主席在大风大浪中前进 朝鲜人民军中国人民志愿军胜利万岁!

Historical circumstances that led to the creation of Composite Buildings

“The accelerated rate of industrial development since the war was due in part to the arrival in the Colony of capital and skilled labour from the Chinese mainland. The population having increased so rapidly between 1945 and 1949, manufacturers had not only a large reservoir of efficient and willing labour to draw upon, but also a considerable local market for certain of their products. Many of the new industries which have grown up since the war have catered particularly for the large markets of South East Asia.”

Hong Kong Annual Report 1954, chapter on “Production and Marketing,” p. 75.



Image: Mak Fung



Image: Tim Ko

Pre-war buildings: development control by building height and lot size

The Public Health and Buildings Ordinance, 1903

Building height not exceed width of street it fronts, and less than 76 feet from street level, and not more than 4 storeys.



Pre-war buildings: development control by building height and lot size



Pre-war shophouse development inadequate for post-war housing and economic development needs



Post-war taller and bigger buildings: more units, more owners

A significant development is the sale of individual flats within a multi-storey structure, and it is now not unusual to find a particular lot owned by upwards of one hundred individuals as tenants in common, the individual shares varying greatly. Development companies have found this a convenient return on their investments

Hong Kong Annual Report 1957, chapter on “Land and Housing,” pp. 183–184.



Image: Lee Ho Yin

1955 Buildings Ordinance: buildings up to 9 storeys can be built without lifts

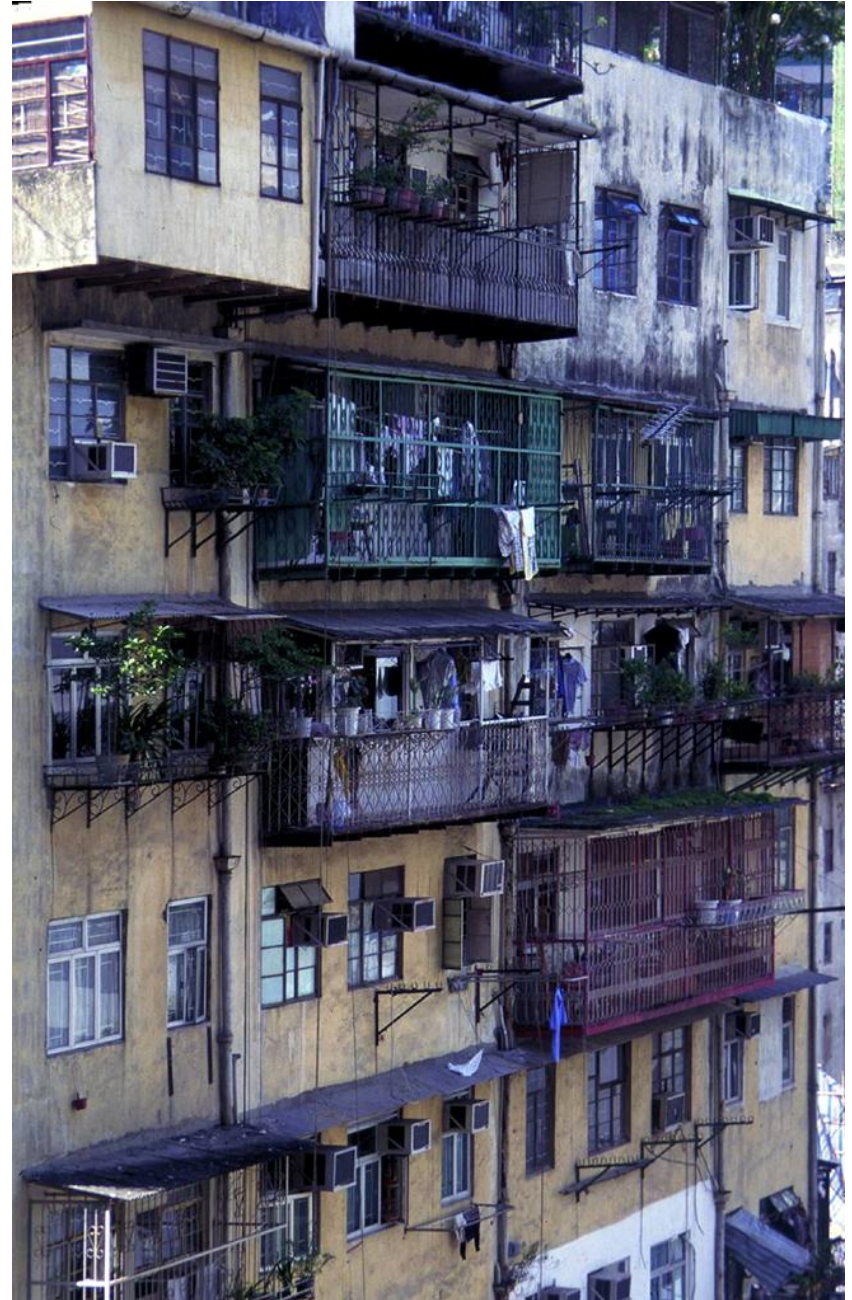
Fuk Kiang Building, Sham Shui Po (1966)
8 residential + 2 commercial floors; 26 flat units, no lift



16 Gage Street, Sheung Wan (1969)
5 residential + 2 commercial floors; 10 flat units, no lift



Claiming airspace: illegal structures (removal enforced since the mid-1990s)



Claiming airspace: enclosed balconies

“One of the results of the shortage of domestic accommodation resulting from the heavy post-war increase of population has been a general tendency for balconies and verandahs to be enclosed in contravention of the law. So long as this shortage of accommodation exists . . . it would not be politic deliberately to aggravate the problem by enforcing the removal of enclosures to verandahs and balconies. It is not therefore proposed to continue the prohibition of such enclosures for the present . . . [the proposal was accepted].”

Director of Public Works, Theodore Louis Bowring,
recorded in “Official Report of Proceedings, Meeting of 21st December, 1955” of the Hong Kong Legislative Council.

White City, Tel Aviv (1930s – 50s)



Image: bauhaus.erfurt.de

Hing Wah Mansion, Hong Kong (1963)



Image: Lee Ho Yin

Claiming airspace: enclosed balconies

“The position with regard to the enclosure of balconies erected over streets has long been considered unsatisfactory. . . . Full enclosure of such balconies is not expressively prohibited by the regulations [authors’ note: this is a matter of policy rather than the law] and has long been tolerated as a means of providing additional living space. The undesirable practice grew [out] of carrying out the work of enclosing these balconies after issue of the occupation permit.”

Legal Supplement No. 2, 29 April 1966 (L.N. 33/66).

White City, Tel Aviv (1930s – 50s)



Mei Wah Building, Hong Kong (1963)



Image: www.openingceremony.us

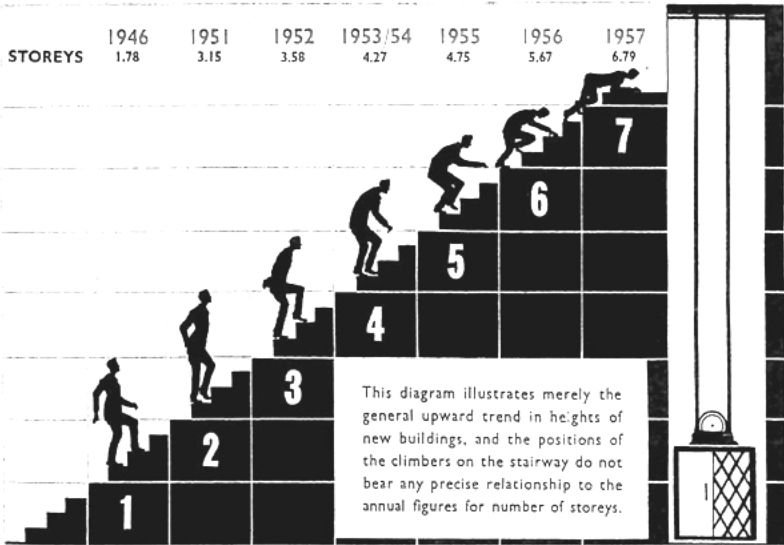
Image: Lee Ho Yin

Post-war buildings: need for more properties – buildings became taller and bigger

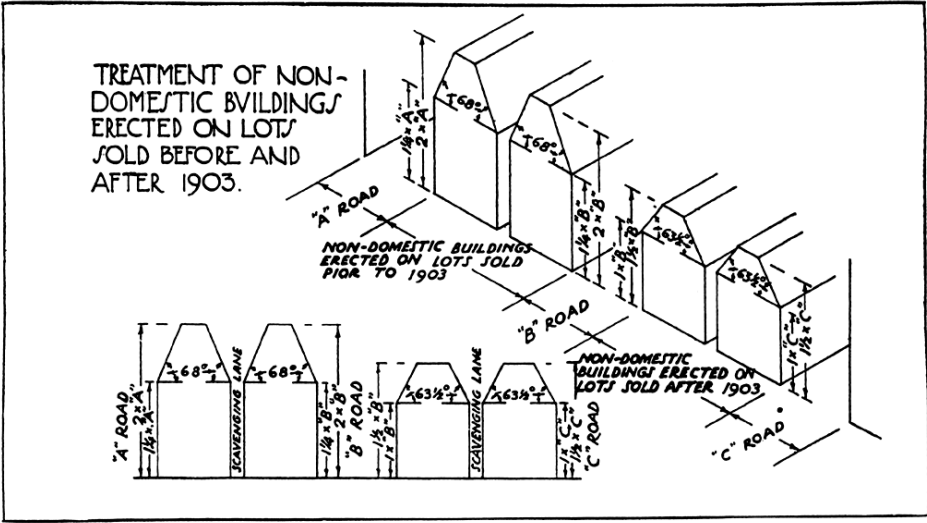
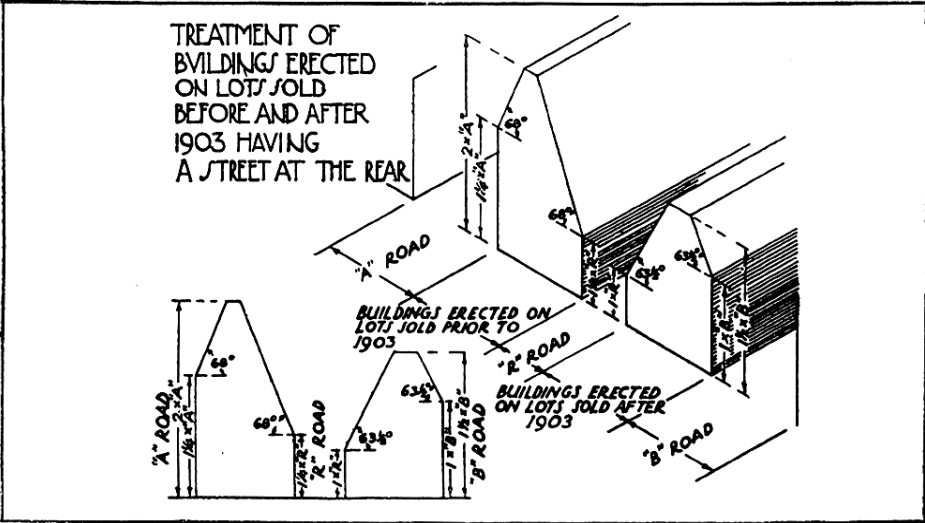
ANNUAL CAPITAL EXPENDITURE ON NEW BUILDINGS IN URBAN AREAS, 1953-57



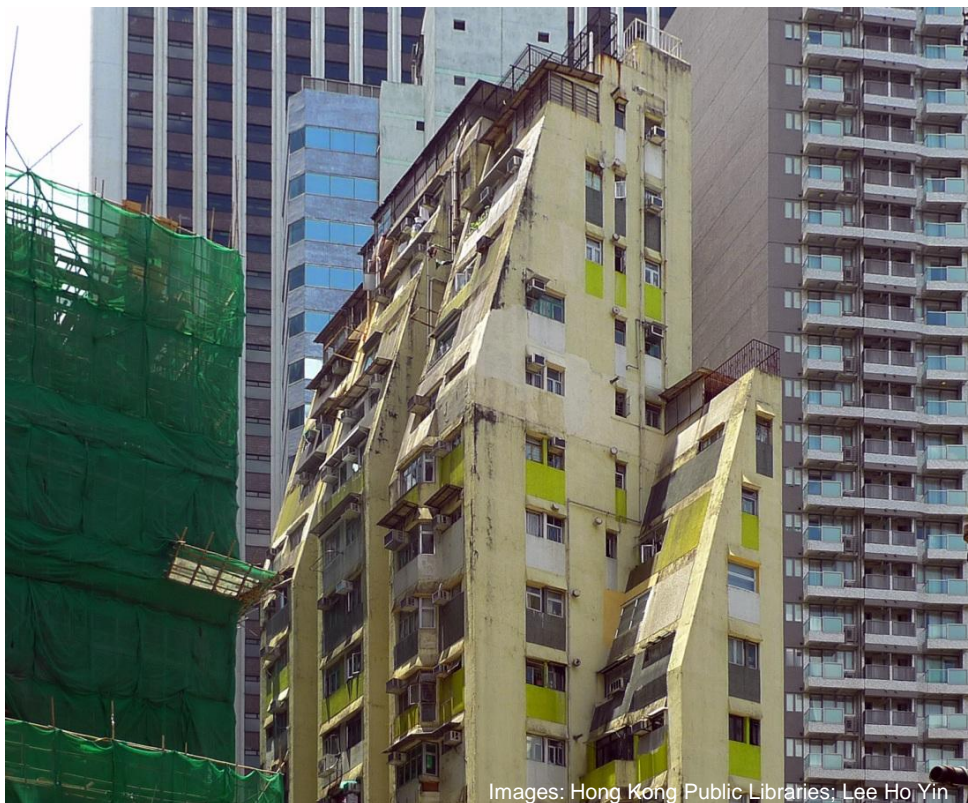
YEAR BY YEAR THE AVERAGE HEIGHT OF NEW BUILDINGS ALSO RISES



Post-war taller and bigger buildings: running out of building volume in the 1960s



Images: Hong Kong Buildings Department



Images: Hong Kong Public Libraries; Lee Ho Yin

Building bigger & taller: new development control by plot ratio & site coverage

Tung Fai Bldg (1975) & Kam Wa Bldg (1964), Shau Kei Wan

“Under the *Building (Planning) Regulations, 1956*, the intensity of development was controlled by means of the volume of a building. . . . But under the provisions of the *Building (Planning) (Amendment) (No 2) Regulations, 1962*, the intensity of development is controlled by the use of ‘**plot ratio**’ [地積比率] and ‘**site coverage**’ [覆蓋率]. Provision is made for a sliding scale whereby the plot ratio increases as the building height increases, but at the same time the area of the site that can be covered by a building is reduced.”

Hong Kong Report for the Year 1962,
chapter on “Land and Housing,” p. 177.

This amendment to the *Building (Planning) Regulations*, was passed in 1962 and would not be fully operative until 1966.



Building bigger & taller: why plot ratio & site coverage

The rationale for this method of development control is:

“[to] provide for an increase in the open space required around buildings, freer pedestrian circulation at ground level, and the raising of minimum standards for lighting and ventilation.”

Hong Kong Report for the Year 1962, chapter on “Land and Housing,” p. 177.

Building bigger & taller: why plot ratio & site coverage

The “canyon effect” created by a continuous row of buildings developed by volumetric control; taller and bigger buildings exacerbate the problem.



Building bigger & taller: new development control by plot ratio & site coverage

The rationale for this amendment to the *Building (Planning) Regulations*, which was passed in 1962 and would not be fully operative until 1966, was explained in the same report:

“[to] provide for an increase in the open space required around buildings, freer pedestrian circulation at ground level, and the raising of minimum standards for lighting and ventilation.”

Hong Kong Report for the Year 1962, chapter on “Land and Housing,” p. 177.

Building bigger & taller: new development control by plot ratio & site coverage

Development control by plot ratio and site coverage results in continuous podiums (typically 15 m from ground level) and free-standing towers, allowing some natural lighting and ventilation at the street level.



Image: Lee Ho Yin

Building bigger & taller: new development control by plot ratio & site coverage

The 1966 method of development control, the principle of which has remained in effect to this day, allows 100% site coverage for the lower portion of a building up to a certain height (usually 15m), and reduced site coverage for the upper portion beyond that height. The resultant architectural form has become a familiar sight in Hong Kong today: a free-standing high-rise residential tower block with open space all round, and perched on a commercial podium base that occupies the full extent of the building site.

The tower-on-podium form of development marked the end of the characteristic volumetric expression of the 1950s and 1960s composite buildings.

Property sales advertisements of a 1960s volumetric composite building (left) and a 1970s commercial-podium-and-residential-tower blocks development.



破紀錄

去界紀錄

付款最少每月1%樓價
(免付首期)

香港紀錄

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德輔道中25號三樓
電話: 20952

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- 1 樓價最平
- 2 地點適中
- 3 交通便利
- 4 一萬伍仟元起
- 5 付款最易
- 6 年期最久
- 7 信譽可靠
- 8 人人做業主

購置辦法:

- 1 每月付樓價百分之二
- 2 不備付定金
- 3 分九十六個月付款
- 4 交款十期後退還一期

(建築期間)

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電話: 5-228205 · 5-241206
地盤: 5-621706 (假日照常)

What is a city in terms of population?

Asia

China:	100,000 inhabitants in a non-agricultural population
Israel:	20,000 inhabitants (generally)
Japan:	50,000 inhabitants
Malaysia:	not defined by population size, but by law
Pakistan:	no formal distinction between cities and towns
Philippines:	150,000 inhabitants
South Korea:	150,000 inhabitants

Americas

Canada:	5,000 or 7,500 inhabitants, depending on provinces
Chile:	5,000 inhabitants
Colombia:	100,000 inhabitants
Mexico:	50,000 inhabitants
US	800 to 2,500 inhabitants, depending on the state
Venezuela:	5,000 inhabitants

Australasia

Australia:	10,000 inhabitants
New Zealand:	50,000 inhabitants

Europe

Bulgaria:	3,500 inhabitants
Denmark:	20,000 inhabitants (generally)
France:	no formal distinction between cities and towns (generally more than 2,000 people)
Germany:	100,000 inhabitants
Netherlands:	50,000 inhabitants (generally)
Norway:	50,000 inhabitants
Poland:	not defined by population size, but by law
Portugal:	10,000 inhabitants
Romania:	5,000 inhabitants
Russia:	12,000 inhabitants
Sweden:	10,000 inhabitants
Turkey:	20,000 inhabitants
Ukraine:	10,000 inhabitants
UK:	not defined by population size, but by law (before 1907, by establishment of an Anglican Cathedral)

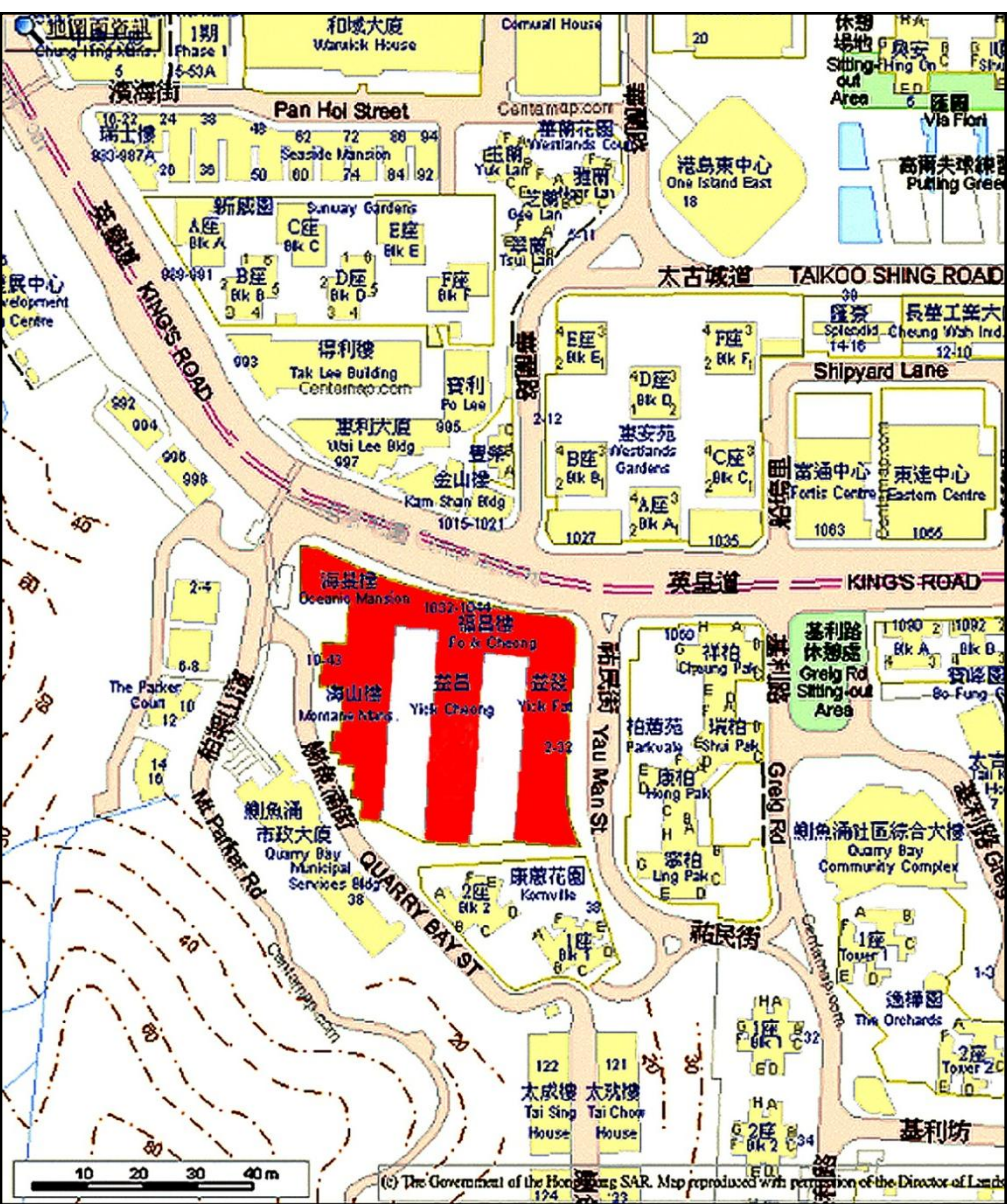
Population in a composite building development

In many countries, when the population of a town has grown to 10,000 inhabitants, the town qualifies to be a city. In Hong Kong, over 10,000 inhabitants are housed within a single development, in 5 block!



Population in a composite building development

In many countries, when the population of a town has grown to 10,000 inhabitants, the town qualifies to be a city. In Hong Kong, over 10,000 inhabitants are housed within a single development, in 5 blocks!



Oceanic Mansion (海景樓)	= 507 units
Montane Mansion (海山樓)	= 432 units
Fok Cheong Building (福昌樓)	= 405 units
Yick Cheong Building (益昌樓)	= 420 units
Yick Fat Building (益發樓)	= 679 units
Total	= 2,443 units

Assuming 4 to 6 inhabitants per unit,
total population = 9,772 to 14,658
(this number does not include the illegal units on the roof)

Unknown soldiers: architects of the 1950s – 60s composite buildings

Here are some of them; how many names do you recognized?

- | | | | |
|----------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Kai Au-yeung (1) | A. H. Basto (9) | L. C. Chan (1) | Chau & Lee Architects (2) |
| C. C. Cheng (1) | S. S. Chien (2) | J. N. Frenkel (1) | H. I. Ip (2) |
| I. U. & Co. (1) | Rudy T. Lau (5) | Edward W. K. Lee (1) | Y. O. Lee (3) |
| Ping K. Ng (1) | Siu-chuen Poon (1) | Yu Seto (1) | H. S. Tam (3) |
| K. S. Wong (1) | Ting-ki Wong (1) | E. Y. Wu (1) | Steven S. L. Yue (7) |



Threat to Composite Buildings

Compulsory sale of properties for redevelopment – threshold lowered from 90% to 80% from 1 April 2010. 舊樓強制拍賣的門檻，由九成降至八成業權，2010年4月1日生效。

The threshold is lowered to 80 percent for the following three classes of lots:

受新規定影響的樓宇主要有3種：

1. The building is more than 50 years old (as of 2010, there are about 2,582 such buildings in Hong Kong).

50年以上樓齡的樓宇 (於2012年，全港約有2582幢)。

2. The building is an industrial building which is more than 30 years old and it lies within a non-industrial zone under a draft or approved Outline Zoning Plan prepared under the Town planning Ordinance (there are about 580 such buildings in Hong Kong).

坐落非工業地帶的逾30年樓齡工廈 (全港約有580幢)。

3. A lot with each of the units on the lot representing more than 10 percent of all the undivided shares in the lot. In such a case the building should have less than 10 units (these refer to buildings of more than 30 years old and less than 9 storeys high in Hong Kong, there are about 6,800 such buildings in Hong Kong).

一個全幢少過10個單位，單位業權佔全幢業權超過10%的樓宇 (這是指少於9層高、樓齡逾30年的樓宇，全港約有6800幢)。

Threat to Composite Buildings

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香港故事（第十二輯）

監製 Executive Producer, 鍾嘉慧

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Media
Real

2010-04-05 第八集：<下鋪到上居>



第八集：<下鋪到上居>

1970年前，香港土地用途規劃較寬鬆，商住混合樓宇因而出現。當年的中小企業用戶都在大廈外牆寫上公司名號，為平凡的石屎建築加添不同形式的文字，時至今日，這些各有姿態的混合用途樓宇，卻成為香港獨有的城市景貌。

編導：陸京嫻

播出日期：2010年4月5日(星期一) 晚上七時亞視本港台

http://programme.rthk.org.hk/rthk/tv/player_popup.php?pid=4742&eid=106345&d=2010-04-05&player=media&type=archive&channel=tv