Book Review
Refabricating City: A Reflection
Edited by Wang Weijen, Thomas Chung
Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Re: Publicizing Architecture.
A review of Refabricating City: A Reflection. Hong Kong Shenzhen Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism / Architecture
Eunice Seng

"...After all, not only has the inaugural Biennale proven that public involvement on architecture and urbanism can take place on multiple levels, planned or spontaneous, it also reveals that the rich layers of this dense metropolis contains endless possibilities for creative expressions in a very real everyday sense. The potential for the Biennale to serve as the linchpin for public discourse on the spaces and aesthetic of the city is tremendous. The collective efforts of its proponents must be applauded, for this is a momentous step towards a more reflective and creative culture."

09 January 2008. Upon entering the Exhibition grounds of the Hong Kong-Shenzhen Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism/Architecture I was greeted by the familiar curatorial array of architectural and urban representations set somewhat unfamiliarly against a recently-cleaned up Central Police Station compound that has been a contested site amongst various interest groups for a decade. I say familiar, in the sense that the Exhibition has aligned itself with the recent trend of the temporary occupation of a historic site in many art and architectural biennales. Unfamiliar: because it is a “public” space that was once reserved for the socially, economically and politically marginalized - those others whom the city would surely prefer to remain anonymous. Such is the uneasy nature of the urban fragment. The implications of the heterotopic underpinnings remain deeply embedded. The current ideologies behind heritage preservation necessitates that historical memory be represented as a pole of power, reasserting temporal and spatial hierarchy to the regional and global public. The Biennale, through the form of a festival, assumes the role of an agent in the urban processes of Hong Kong.

The Book, published on the eve of the second HK-SZ Biennale, is presented as “at once a record and a reflection on the Biennale” and the editors (also the curators of the Exhibition) have taken on the role of agent provocateurs of “project Re” — re-fabrication being the main theme. Formally, it re-stages the four aspects of the Biennale, arranging them in the order of 1) the Forum, 2) the Exhibition, 3) Venue and Event, 4) Lecture and Dialogue. It uses the linear format of the Book, to complete the circle of openness and inclusion. It is comprehensive in its coverage of the Biennale from its origins to its closing including the editors’ attempts to extrapolate the afterlife of the Exhibition. Post-Biennale reflections are woven into the earlier transcripts of the Forum. Contributors were invited to amend and update their texts in time for its public release in early 2010. Ample space was given to acknowledging the significance of “reclaiming” a space that was once a historical exclusion and to “reframing” it as a temporary public space and an open arena for public discussions on architecture and the city. The processes of making and of envisioning are interwoven into the narratives of the site in that the spatial histories are uncovered through the act of juxtaposing new architectural propositions with the disused compound.

From the onset, the editors announced their intention for the Biennale as part of “the urban process of shaping [Hong Kong’s] public space,” emphasizing “consensus-building and negotiation for a shared urban vision.” The scope for citizen action, public participation and discourse outlined by the curators was promising. The overlapping threads of conversations include the relationships between Hong Kong and Shenzhen and the theme of “fabricating and refabricating” for an architectural biennale and the aesthetic representations of Hong Kong’s urbanism (in chief curator’s Wang Weijen’s interview with Ralph Lerner, the Wang’s dialogue with Zhu Tao and Zhu’s essay “Shenzhen-Hong Kong (Dis)Integration,” as well as Ruan Ching-Yue’s essay “One Fish Two Eat”), and the form and process of the Biennale (in the interviews with Chang Yong-ho and Rocco Yim, Liu Jiakun’s “Exhibitor’s Impression” and Lee Ou-fan’s “The Flaneur in the City of Life”).

The Book chose to adopt the title with the prefix “Re-”. The editors attend to the reflection on three levels: through a revisit to the Exhibition by contemplating the Event through the reprinting of the various organized dialogues, a record and recording of the Exhibition by providing the standardized blank page surface for the individual works to be printed on, and an act of reclaiming the Venue through a recollection of the history of the Central Police Station Compound. The Exhibition had performed the acts of the “refabrication” literally as the curators weave architectural events into an otherwise prohibited space and invite the public to witness the Biennale as it reclaimed an urban space for architecture. For a Biennale conceived to be immersed in dialogues and wrapped up in discourse, the post-exhibition publication is already setting itself up to be more than a compendium to the Exhibition. One in turn expects it to be complicit to the re-statement of the dominant ideas, to jumpstart “a strong collective movement” which Ralph Lerner saw to be lacking in Hong Kong, and to be a launch pad for a stronger architectural culture (p10). The potential of the Book to tackle the ambitious task of reaching beyond being simply a record and reflection of the Biennale event is somehow held back by the same professionalism— as appreciatively commented by exhibitor, architect Liu Jiakun in his “Exhibitor’s Impression” (p38) — that governs the representation of the Biennale. Indeed, although the editors asked many questions through the frame of the “re” — “How do we regenerate our city by allowing alternative mechanisms rather than a singular hegemonic mode? How could we be able to build smaller grains in the city while maintaining a metropolitan structure?” etc. — their stance towards “a strong collective movement” remains understated. As co-editor and co-curator Thomas Chung declared, the primary focus of the inaugural Hong Kong Biennale is to reflect on and reappraise the 160 years of the city’s urban fabric in the making, rather than the provocative approach of its counterpart in Shenzhen (p49).

Herein lies an opening where the Book which, as the fifth public event in itself provides a space for reflection and could undertake the task of unpacking the trope of the “re-“. Typically prefixed to ordinary verbs of action (chiefly transitive) and to derivatives from these, “re” sometimes denote that the action itself is performed a second time, and sometimes that its result is to reverse a previous action or process, or to restore a previous state of things (OED). In this case, what had been and are still undergoing re-fabrication, reclamation, and reframing in the Book became the main concern. The Biennale had presented to the public, through the exhibition and dialogues, a city in evolution: the individual and collaborative efforts of all those who participated in the making of the Biennale collectively raised the need for the recuperation of public space for a heterogeneous citizenry. Such curatorial confrontation between reflection (as both an act and a throw-back image) and the public “sphere” (as both a discursive social space of opinions and anonymous identities and a physically bounded space) is downplayed in the Book which as a whole presents itself more as a retrospective of a past event than a retroactive one with the ambition to be projective, so as to highlight the evolutionary urban process that the Biennale is meant to be an agent of.

Reflection, at its base, is a direct gaze. For Michel Foucault, the mirror – that thing through which the reflection is rendered visible – presents itself as a utopia in that the space within it is unreal, yet it is heterotopic at the same time in that it is a physical presence in itself and the space
within it is recognizable and “localizable.” From this view, the Book functions as a mosaic mirror, seemingly burdened by the procedures of a book as a record of events. Upon an initial cursory reading of the Book, it seems as if professionalism and multiplicities has placated ideological content and instrumentality, and academicism has appealed agency. The overall thrust of the well-intended, carefully curated Biennale with its celebration of bottom-up approaches predicated on the indeterminacy of the figure or, with Michel de Certeau as the ideological figure, is represented in book format. The projects are re-curated in the order to restate the emphasis on reflecting Hong Kong projects against others. The record begins with “Mapping Twin Cities: Shenzhen & Hong Kong” (p69), followed by works on Hong Kong and/or by Hong Kong practitioners and researchers in “Mapping Fabric” (pp70-111) and concludes with parallel Exhibitions that took place in the in-between spaces such as the open-air courtyards and cramped prison cells. Notwithstanding that implicit in all the “non-corporate” installations is the possibility of architecture to affect change at a micro-level such as through user-activated spaces and environments, the projective endeavors in the Biennale are only concentrated within the exhibition category “Envisioning Fabric” (pp188-201) which consists of architectural and urban speculations on different cities by various architects. The Project (or collective vision), is presented in the framework of procedural objectivity.

Nevertheless, the undertaken mode of reflection could be productive, even provocative, in setting the stage for further critical reflection. In his curatorial statement, Wang Weijen refers to the heterotopic urban settings of Hong Kong through the lens of art and film as a counterpoint to an urban morphology based on efficiency and technocracy (p.5). This prognosis of the fracture in cultural production is crucial. In a city where architecture is first and foremost a professional service and art seems to enjoy a greater freedom at least in terms of its formal expressions (not withstanding the oft-heard comment that there is no artistic culture in Hong Kong), surely the foregrounding of urban processes would create a space for architecture – even if it is to be critical – to be reevaluated? The Book as reflection is timely as it attempts to capture the actual processes before it is completely overshadowed by the Biennale as spectacle. Chung, in his retelling the “Exhibition Strategy and Thematic Intentions,” revealed that one of the foremost functions of the sub-themes was to set local works against Mainland and International work within a spectrum of scales, locations and intensities. His own post-Exhibition reflection – aptly titled “Towards a Critical Refabrication” emphasizes on the need for self-critique and reappraisal of the current urbanism in Hong Kong amongst all those involved in the city’s architectural and urban production (p49).

The five lectures and six dialogues at the end of the Book reveal the editors attempt to unpack the tropes of everyday life and the rhetoric of bottom-up approaches to effectively reflect upon the fragments of the modern metropolis. Taking the prefix "re-" to mean literally “to do over” critically (as with Foucault’s take on the mirror as the critical space for the tracing out of the distinct intersection between the dichotomy of “ideologies” and “procedures”), the Book can be seen more as a beginning of a public-level discourse rather than just a wrap-up of a public event. As the architecture and urban festival was unfolding, the Mark I housing blocks at Shek Kip Mei were undergoing rapid demolition. All except for one exhibition block designated for artistic and creative events were taken down. Memories of the Star Ferry and Queen’s Pier had been erased. The Central Market was awaiting its verdict for its transformation into a public mall. The Tate-phenomenon, or closer to home, the top-down implementation of creative districts in mainland China are all demonstrations of a process that is taking place in the late industrial, late-capitalist millennia city where contemporary criteria on preservation is underscored by economic impetus. Viewed against a larger global context where major cities are witnessing a reversal in value of the historic sites, the erasure or disneyification (perhaps even an even worse fate) of such places in Hong Kong is not an exception. The Central Police Station site itself is over-powering. The Biennale did not explicitly challenge the expected fate of the Central Police Station. The architecture of the site and the history of its spaces over-powered the temporary architectures set against it. Instead, the Exhibition and the Book re-presented the site to the public from the perspectives of the individual artist (Stanley Wong’s autobiographical representations, pp88-89), the government (the Urban Renewal Authority’s visual account of the city’s urban redevelopment in “Re-Space,” pp90-91); and the curatorial accounts which include Thomas Chung’s historical recollection of the compound in “Re-membering” (pp92-93) that he expanded upon in his essay “Venue History and Refabrication” (pp222-231), Stephen Chan’s “Venue Design” (pp232-33) and Martin Fung’s “From Biennale to Festival” (pp240-43). Rather than proposing alternatives – concrete or speculative – for the future development of the site, the organizers chose to open this question up to the public. Apropos, despite the efforts to generate public interests and participation, the exhibition as a whole, an individual project and the book could have reflectively or projectively considered the question raised by Rocco Yim as to why “the vitality of the street markets has little to do with the quality of the architecture” in Hong Kong (pp272-273). His own matter-of-fact response was that the public (citizens) were unable to articulate the issues on “the art of architecture” – a problem he identified as the result of the government’s disinterest in architecture’s role in improving a city’s urban image as well as the fear of risk-taking by an administration based on a “half-baked democracy.” Yim asserted that the role of the Biennale is to take on the task of articulating and publicizing the problem of the art of architecture in the city. Just as the productive possibilities in the bottom-up initiatives of the Exhibition were perhaps too successfully “refabricated” back into the imbricated urban layers of the city, the Book, in staying close to its pronouncement as a record and reflection, could also take further the task of projection, of a collective vision and of propositioning counter-alternatives to the (public) reader. Notwithstanding, the statistics at the end of the Book is ample motivation for the next public event on architecture to take up the challenges brought forth by the Biennale as it is reflected and reframed within its well-laid out pages. After all, not only has the inaugural Biennale proven that public involvement on architecture and urbanism can take place on multiple levels, planned or spontaneous, it also reveals that the rich layers of this dense metropolis contains endless possibilities for creative expressions in a very real everyday sense. The potential for the Biennale to serve as the linchpin for public discourse on the spaces and aesthetic of the city is tremendous. The collective efforts of its proponents must be applauded, for this is a momentous step towards a more reflective and creative culture.
建築師：呂永順

香港建築師會

由呂永順先生及吳永順先生於2010年8月14日及21日的居樂報
Empowered to Go Beyond the Limit
Chan Nga Yin, Amy

I launched my debut book “Eggs of Hong Kong: A Dialogue between People and Architecture” during the Book Fair 2009. It is one of the eight winning entries of the Young Writers’ Debut Competition organized by the SHKP Book Club in collaboration with Joint Publishing.

My book took the British Architect Cedric Price’s analogy of urban morphologies with different types of eggs: hard boiled fried and scrambled. It is not only a book about architecture, but also an investigation into the history, local culture and transformation of Hong Kong. I hope that readers can bring my book to travel around Hong Kong and thus experience and explore the city in a brand new way.

The competition was divided into different stages and lasted for nearly a year. Firstly, I needed to submit a draft proposal and attend interviews with judges and editors. Entering the semi-final, I was assigned to an advisor, Mr. Vincent Wong, the Director of Strategic Planning, Hong Kong Commercial Broadcasting Co. Ltd to formulate ideas into a book. Mr. Wong’s experience and understanding of book publishing was helpful to me and I learned beyond just the architectural research.

Most people regard writing as a lonely career since you are all by yourself when you write. You may not have teammates and the response from readers can hardly be anticipated. However, recognition from others is encouraging, especially for a new author like me. One of these was from Atelier Bow-Wow, Tokyo-based modern architecture firm founded in 1992 by Yoshinari Tsukamoto and Momoyo Kajima.

I am really inspired by their book “Made in Tokyo”, which investigated and recorded the “not pretty” architecture in Tokyo. Reading through the book, I was amazed to see that Tokyo had a systematic record of the local architecture while no one had attempted to do so in Hong Kong. When the first draft of my book was published, my teacher, Professor N. Matsuda, helped me to send the book to Japan and got it signed by Yoshinari Tsukamoto, the author of “Made in Tokyo”. Let me share the quote with you:

“Observation is love; Persistence is Power”

You have to indulge yourself in your work and stay persistent to achieve your goal. Everyone fails or gets confused along the path of searching, but one’s determination is important.

I was working on my thesis for my Master degree at the same time I had to meet the deadline of the book submission. People simply think that to handle these two tasks at the same time is mission impossible. But as my advisor, Mr. Wong said, “One common trait of Hong Kong people is multi-tasking, you will perform to limits that you cannot ever imagine. As we are young and we have dream, we should treasure whatever we are doing now that can empower us to achieve something that we have never imagined before.”

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建築師羅慶鴻從建築思維啟程，他媽親構香港城市設計、房地產開發、建築保育等後的政經社會文化因素。

「建築物是人創造出來的，也和人一樣有著軀體（外表）與靈魂（內涵）的雙重性。」

羅慶鴻循兩條線索展開《政經建築觀》一書，香港都市發展實例反思的寫作。通過作者與建築前輩陳之信等在不同階段的六組對話，刻畫出一位建築師在成長過程中的心路探索。另一方面，從抽提近年香港都市典型案例，分析香港政府、房地產開發商和居民對都市發展的不同取態，前者乃個人對建築內容的感悟，後者是群體對建築物在功能層次的運用與感性領域的體會，以此探究香港都市發展的內在設計邏輯和外部理念取向。

本書風格迥異於坊間的香港建築和都市發展書籍，它沒有停留建築風格介紹或著眼於傳統社區特色討論，而是將視角提升至建築哲學、社會文化和政府管治領域。作者引入政府管治、公共資源、歷史意識、社會價值等概念，對香港都市發展、房地產發展、都市重建模式做出反思，作者通過歷史事件分析政府管治文化對城市發展的影響，深刻指出特區政府在傳統「被動式行政文化」薰陶下，在制訂公共建設政策和組織社會參與時，往往將重心放在「怎麼做」的操作層面，較少涉及「為什麼」層面，基本上是「有為什麼」的結構，以經濟收益極大化為前提的市區重建模式，使新建築物缺乏地方文化、社會意義的經濟產品，向來主導香港公共政策的資本主義之功利精神，在舊區重建項目及以眾人為本的社區精神相逢衝擊，牽扯出一連串社會矛盾，作者受到亞里斯多大的《政經建築觀》啟發，尤其強調社區參與保育的必要性。

羅慶鴻在香港歷史建築評估、文物及保育和舊區活化領域的豐富經驗，使他對近年熱門話題如西九龍發展、觀塘重建、天星事件提出別樹一格的看法。他闡釋了建築理論，培養了紀錄理性原則規劃的西九龍項目和文獻藝術理念的矛盾衝突，觀塘重建在發展和保育之間的難解之題，特別是作者針對天星事件引發香港新一代對集体回憶的守護運動，就集體回憶對歷史建築物去留和保育的重要性，提出該概念的模範兩可性質，令議題容易流於簡單化、浪漫化、絕對化，以致牽引出避而不談的社會回應。

稍有不足是，本書较多從資源角度分析香港作為經濟城市的內在發展矛盾，港企在高值連帶動下，貴價發展土地，港府在低稅率下，發展不足，且要滿足高昂的財政需求，難免土地財政，政經結合正是功利式建築觀。 「過度高增值」往往令空間有限的經濟城市步入「過度地產化」，紐約、倫敦和東京是同様如此，房地產去勢和短效服務型城市的可能性、結構性問題，香港先行先試，也示範著，解套之道恐怕超越保育二字。

真正讓人掩卷回味並非香港都市发展的實例分析，乃是作者從哲學的高度來思考建築和規劃的內涵，「建築設計和規劃若缺乏哲學觀點是不能夠開門的」，六組對話中的「會說話的建築」和「看不見的建築」構築建築師的構築建築物的同時，利用建築上的歷史語言，將時時處處的政經體制和藝術思潮，帶進建築設計和城市發展，賦能諸多建築物，他們利用永恆的建築語言，將建築構成一首凝固的音樂，穿梭時空與後來人深情對話，作者沒有一面倒地批判港府發展策略的失敗，亦或無保留地推崇香港時下得令的集體回憶思潮。他秉持平心態，採取對話交流形式，反思香港城市困局，探索未來方向，這也不是一本讓人討厭的書籍，因為作者冀望傳達出哲者式的熱愛言論。

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Lost in Translation –
An adventure to the Southern Highland of Peru

Margaret Lau

The first bunch of sun-beam pieced through the cloud and mist from the east side of the sacred mountain, warming my body from zero temperature, colouring up the hidden castle at the mountain top. I could finally reveal the magnificent scene which I had been dreaming of - an amazing castle laying silently on the top of the mountain that is more than 3000m above the city we are living in. The golden city finally woke up, empowered by the sun, with shadows of the remains of walls highlighting the most stunning lost city in Inca time – the Macchupicchu, Cusco, Peru.

I desired to visit the legendary lost city of Macchupicchu since I was young when I knew her from a Japanese cartoon series – “The Son of Golden City”. I promised to myself that I would be ready to reach the sacred place after I learned Spanish, the national language of Peru. I just could not believe the chance came so sudden that I even didn’t have time to learn the very basic of the language! In mid July 2006, my journey of discovery started. After 30 hours of flight with two transit stops via European countries, I reached Lima, the capital of Peru, which locates exactly the opposite side of the globe from Hong Kong.

Hola! Como esta?

I started my journey with a week of International Conference at the Catholic University of Lima. With limited ability on Spanish, my first trouble came when making order at the school canteen. Although it seems to be an easy task, I could not accomplish it even with my little traveller’s phrase book in hand.

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Hola! Como esta? – A simple greeting did help to start my conversation with a local student at the canteen. Peru people were helpful to traveller. I finally got my first meal and learnt a new Spanish phrase which helped so much to quench my thirst in my journey afterward – Chicamona, Un, por favor! (A glass of sweet-corn juice, please!)

Coca Te, por favor!

So, for the rest of the week, I drank chicamona every meal, wishing to get used to the taste and life of Peruvian as soon as possible. It was until I reached Cusco that I knew the “Coca Te” was the true local taste for a pragmatic reason. Cusco, the capital of Inca Empire before the Spanish conquer, was also the gateway to the sacred site of Macchupicchu, which located above the sea level by 3,350 meter. To heal people from adverse physical reaction at that high altitude, Coca tea is the real drink for the local!

After Cusco and Machupicchu, the rest of my journey was travelling mainly on area at 2500m above sea level. That included the world’s highest navigatable lake at Puno - the Lake Titicaca. There are a few habitable islands in the lake. Comparing to the famous floating island of Uros, another habitable island, Amantani, is more quiet and authentic. I spent one night there with one of the local family, trying to understand more about their life there.

No hablo Espanol. Lo siento!

I reached the Amantani and lived with a local family for 2 days. It was the time I totally got lost since the local people spoke only Quiche (a local dialect) and a little bit Spanish.

No hablo Espanol. Lo siento! (I’m sorry, I can’t speak Spanish) - A sentence I found from my little traveller’s phrase book helped me to explain my situation to the local family. Although I could not communicate with the family by words, body language and facial expression did help me to share and experience their life. Compared to the metropolitan Lima and the glamorous Cusco, life in the island was much simpler and poor.

At night time, the temperature of the island dropped to freezing point. The house of the local people was very basic and simple. Constructed with dried mud bricks and reinforced by dried grass, the thermal insulation of the wall was performing surprisingly well. Otherwise, I would be so difficult to survive from the freezing night.

Before I left, I gave the family a pack of ball pens which I bought from HK as gift. They were so delighted and showed a true and beautiful smile which was long lost from the faces of people from materialistic world like Hong Kong. Although their living condition is harsh, life seems to be contented. I didn’t know how tourism could help to improve their living conditions. I just hope that tourism didn’t pollute their mind.

Adios! Peru.

After my journey at the southern highland, my route turned north and headed back to Lima again to complete my journey as a full circle. Along my way, I could see diversified natural landscape, and also very different life between the poor and the rich. Fortunately, everything seemed to be at an equilibrium point and the country at the moment was in a peaceful atmosphere. But there was one scene that I found very shocking. In the city Acrequipa, there was a volcano backing the skyline of city. It was a snow-capped mountain the whole year round. During the time of our visit, the snow cap should be at its largest coverage since it was winter time in the Southern hemisphere. However, when I compared this with an old photo in the Museum of Acrequipa, showing the same mountain 50 years ago, it was astonishing to find that the snow cap nowadays was less than half of the original size! It warned us that we are sharing the same globe, the same environment. No matter developed or developing countries, we are facing the same threat from Global warming problem. I don’t think anybody will like to see the beautiful natural environment ruined like the lost city of Macchupicchu, it’s time to react.

I left Peru, after visiting the country briefly. I loved the Peruvian people and was amazed by the intelligence of Inca culture. I promised that I would be back, with better preparation and language ability next time!
Obituary:
Hugh Cedric Astbury (1922 – 2010)

Mr. Hugh Cedric Astbury, Past President of the then Hong Kong Society of Architects in 1965, passed away on 18 August 2010.

Mr. Astbury was a graduate of the Architectural Association in London and a Fellow of the Royal Institute of British Architects. His professional life took him to Singapore and finally to Hong Kong, in 1959, where he practiced with the Public Works Department of the Hong Kong Government until his retirement in 1983. His successful career in the field of architecture was well known to many architects of all generations.

He was a very active Member of the Society and his contribution to the profession was remarkable. His contribution to the Methodist church in particular was well recognised.

We are saddened that he left us but the example that he set for his fellow members as a dedicated professional shall be long lasting.

The Institute extends its deepest condolences to Mr. Astbury’s family.