Creative industries, public engagement and urban redevelopment in Hong Kong: Cultural regeneration as another dose of isotopia?☆

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ABSTRACT

Culture-led urban regeneration has been the buzzword of many cities around the world nowadays. There are two related ways to interrogate this problematic. First, it is about the extent to which it is a real urban future for cities. Second, it is about its applicability to cities other than those in the West. This article attempts to tackle these related queries by, first, invoking Lefebvre's concepts of utopia *vs* isotopia and, then, drawing on two cases of cultural regeneration in an industrial district and an old residential neigbourhood in Hong Kong. The conceptual discussion of utopia highlights the imperative of spatial contradictions as the prerequisite for the emergence of concrete utopia; otherwise, it only results in isotopia. As such, it is difficult for cultural regeneration to produce utopia. This, in turn, calls for greater attention to the historical–geographical processes that have produced the conditions for the concerned city. It is these processes that differentiate Hong Kong from many others in the West. The prevailing land (re)development regime has favoured some processes at the expense of others. The two empirical cases have confirmed that either spatial contradictions were not there, or if they ever emerged, they were time and space specific. These conditions rendered it difficult to nurture creativity and to really relegate the decision-making power to the people, thereby denying the possible applicability of the problematic of cultural regeneration to Hong Kong.

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1. Introduction

Culture-led urban regeneration has been the buzzword of many cities around the world nowadays (e.g., Evans, 2001). There is the claim that cultural/creative industry is the panacea for many urban economic and (less so) societal problems. Yet, this claim has increasingly been treated with scepticism. On the one hand, in his review of this cultural turn a decade ago, Miles (2005) queries the creativeness of creative industries and the extent to which these proclaimed successful practices can be transferred across cities—Barcelona's success, say, was spatio-temporally unique. A decade later, Vanolo (2013) reiterates that the concepts of creative class and of creative places are highly problematic as both have ignored their external conditions of existence. On the other, Shin and Stevens (2013) criticise these urban regeneration research and practices for having eschewed the political processes involved and, in turn, suggest improving over them by underscoring the collaborative relations amongst many agents, including, prominently, the grassroots. Due to the expansion of civil society, Douglass (2013) suggests that we should drop the concept of cultural economy, one of commodity consumption, and, instead, adopt that of creative communities, one of political mobilisation. Lefebvre (2009, p.193) would

have been very critical of Douglass' employment of the concept of 'conviviality' as it has confused the end with the means. The latter distinction may resemble the one between abstract utopia – desire – and concrete utopia – will to transform underlying social relations. In sum, people nowadays have more reservation than before about culture-led regeneration both from economic development and political mobilisation.

That being said, the literature has basically glossed over one essential discussion: the applicability of the problematic of culture-led regeneration to the rest of the world, including East Asia. While Vanolo (2013, pp.1786–88) unveils that the West has, via all sorts of international organisations, been responsible for publicising the 'normative' approach to cultural economy to the rest of the world, his argument is still focused on the highly selected experience of Christiana in Denmark. Although Shin and Stevens (2013) have chosen South Korea as the case study, they have uncritically relied on the big assumption that collaborative planning can be applied there. Similar critique can be waged on Douglass (2013) given his reliance on the Western concept of civil society. In a recent critique of urban China research, Tang (2014a) has great reservation about the uncritical application of many Western concepts to China, including world/global city, governance, neoliberalism, entrepreneurialism, inter-city competitiveness, place making, and gentrification. Most of these concepts have been randomly indigenised and applied to the local context without paying attention to its underlying forces. (Some have also been randomly appropriated by the local

authority for governing purposes.) Using Hong Kong urbanisation as a case study, Tang (2014b) has further warned us not to take for granted the urban and the rural and the relations between the two from the Western historical experience. Will it also be true to culture-led urban regeneration? It is the objective of this paper to take up this issue by drawing on the experience of Hong Kong.

Like other cities, Hong Kong in the early 2000s had designated creative industries as one of her prioritised economic growth sectors. Since then, there have been many proclaimed attempts to promote cultural and creative industries (Lai and Leung, 2014). Urban renewal was somehow praised as an avenue to foster these industries in the 2005 Policy Address of the first Chief Executive (Tung, 2005: 34–5), and the West Kowloon Cultural District and these industries were considered as two pillars by his successor. Besides, after being criticised for adopting the bulldozer approach of redevelopment and for implementing the ineffective colonial practice of setting up independent committees for soliciting opinions, the Hong Kong Government has turned to public engagement for rescue. For this purpose, it has set up a pilot district urban renewal forum in Kowloon City District Council. These can be deemed as the attempts to achieve some form of urban utopia in the city.

This paper has a different take of these developments. It attempts to illustrate that these are but isotopia, formulated by the Hong Kong Government, to facilitate the integration of Hong Kong with the Chinese mainland. This is to be achieved by, first, elaborating the more critical concepts formulated by Lefebvre including utopia. It underscores the imperative of unravelling spatial contradictions in absolute, relative, and relational spaces. This conceptual discussion is instrumental in identifying the underlying conditions for the production of utopia and, its negation, isotopia in Hong Kong. As the hegemony of the land (re)development regime (Tang, 2008) – property development as the key for the achievement of the norm of prosperity – prevails in the city, where politics and the rationale of governing are different from the West, there are constraints to nurture creativity, on the one hand, and, on the other, disincentives to relegate the decision-making power to the people. Against this conceptual backdrop, the paper proceeds to investigate two cultural regeneration cases. The first involves artists setting up an art community in vacant flatted factory buildings in Fo Tan district, the Shatin new town. In comparison, the second focuses on regeneration in an inner-city residential district—the widely acclaimed Blue House project in the related Wedding Cards Street Redevelopment Project (H15), the Wanchai district. The choice of these two cases is meant to furnish a short essay like this with the minimal variety of evidence for the issue in hand. The overall methodology to elaborate these two cases is apparently dictated by the conceptual frame of the paper. Unlike a pure empiricist piece, in which there is a disparate division between theory and empiric, the role of case study is to assemble yet another piece of evidence to prove the already established theory. The discussion in one of the earlier paragraphs has queried this position, intending to articulate evidences for the construction of a new understanding. Since the historical–geographical processes or mechanisms involved are more perceptive for this purpose, the case studies will take the form of intensive research rather than an extensive one (e.g., Sayer, 1992, pp.241–51). Accordingly, there is not so much quantitative generalisation of patterns as qualitative documentary search, interviews, analysis, and in-depth story-writing of processes. Given their different natures, however, the two cases vary in fine detail within this overall methodology. The Fo Tan case, the dynamics of which are simpler, pinpoints more precisely spatial contradictions between the artist community and other users both within the industrial district and without other districts in the vicinity. Amongst others, the relevant technique is bound to be interviews with the agents concerned. Whereas in the Blue House case, which cannot be isolated from many intertwining developments over time and across space in the city, the technique of story-writing supplemented with some interviews tend to be more productive in unveiling the processes. In comparison, the

complexity also makes the latter case thicker and longer in elaboration than the former. Based on the above conceptual and case analyses, the final section will explore the possibility of cultural regeneration in Hong Kong.

2. Conceptual discussion: From utopia, cultural revolution, and spatial contradictions, to the Hong Kong socio-historical specificity

Lefebvre's theories, including the production of space, urban revolution, and state theory, all point to a nuanced way of understanding utopia (Lefebvre, 2003). The urban intellectuals help shape the formation of abstract space, which, once materialised by state planning and administration, becomes a repressive space. Abstract space is the product of what is conceived, or the representation of space. It is abstract as space everywhere is repetitious, homogeneous, commodified, and gender-biased. It is conditioned only by the logic of money (and so the exchange value) that has no real concern for qualitative difference. In contrast, people live their life through spatial practices, possibly constructing their spaces of representation. The latter may stand at odds with their counterpart, representations of space. Contradictions of capitalism, then, manifest themselves as contradictions of space. It is out of these interstices that differential space start to emerge. Once the space is changed, so will be life. This is Lefebvre's concrete utopia. In contrast, state planning and administration tries hard to perpetuate the hegemony of the abstract space. This happens when the abstract space envelops and incorporates the daily dreams and aspirations of the underprivileged population as well as when it has become part and parcel of their everyday life. Accordingly, the abstract space is an isotopia. The latter refers to the same place – neighbourhood and immediate its environs – and is defined at each level—political, commercial, and religious, etc. (Elden, 2004, pp.146–47).

Relevant to our discussion here is Lefebvre's call for a permanent cultural revolution. It has no parallel to the concept of cultural in cultural regeneration. Unlike the latter, it is not an isolated aspect, separated from the holistic concern. For Lefebvre, it is not an aesthetic revolution, not a revolution based on culture; neither its aim nor motive is culture. Rather, it is a revolution in culture to create a style of life (Elden, 2004, p.118) and a differential space, effecting more lasting transformative changes, or produced differences.

Many have criticised Lefebvre for being vague on details of his theorisation. Central to Lefebvre's argument is the concept of spatial contradictions. Nevertheless, he is less specific on elaborating their sources and the tactics available. Allen (2003, p.171), for example, highlights the significance of place constitution—the spatial relational ties. One may interpret Harvey's (2006, especially pp.133–48) spatial matrix, which combines Lefebvre's conceptual triad with three concepts of space (absolute, relative, and relational), as a similar attempt to enrich Lefebvre's under-theorisation. (Absolute space refers to a conception of space as a container, within which material objects and events can be located with precision. Relative space means that space is filled with objects and relations, and therefore space is relative to other things and time. Relational space denotes that space is embedded in or internal to process, something always in the process of making.)

In a similar vein, Vanolo (2013, pp.1787–1788) has criticised the problematic of cultural creativity for adopting the container conception of space. The ways social practices are played out in space have been belittled. Besides, one should not restrict the discussion of relational processes to that of the market economy. Finally, whether the urban quarter is creative depends on the relative recognition by external actors. In other words, one may improve the understanding of cultural creativity by deciphering the interaction of spatial processes across scales and within scales.

I would argue that these are only technical fixes to the problem, as these improvements have seldom touched on the crux of the matter. Whether any spatial processes at various scales and within scales