



Research Paper

Explaining the inequitable spatial distribution of public open space in Hong Kong



Bo-sin Tang*

Department of Urban Planning and Design, University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

HIGHLIGHTS

- Cluster analysis shows open space in Hong Kong has three distinctive land-use zoning patterns.
- Urban planning contributes to the inequitable distribution of open space across housing and commercial development.
- There is inconsistent land-use zoning policy on existing public open space managed by the government.
- Open space planning is influenced by political development of the city.
- Open space serves different purposes apart from recreation at different times in history.

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ABSTRACT

This study evaluates the underlying logic of urban planning behind the inequitable geographical distribution of public open space in Hong Kong. Existing open spaces and areas zoned as open spaces are found to have distinct patterns of distribution. Fewer than half of Hong Kong's 1737 public parks and recreation grounds were zoned as 'Open Space' in town plans. Three typical land-use zoning configurations adjoining the 1177 'Open Space' zones are identified. A large proportion of Hong Kong's 'Open Space' zones, particularly those with waterfront access, were located close to upmarket, low-density housing areas and mixed commercial-business zones, rather than to high-density mass housing zones. An historical review elucidates the influence of colonial politics, racial harmony, public hygiene and democratisation on open space planning and development in Hong Kong. Recreation is not the only social function of open space. The government's latest planning and development strategies – expanding a network of new open spaces at strategic waterfront locations and near commercial/business zones, and encouraging private-sector participation in place promotion and urban marketing – may exacerbate the inequitable distribution of open space, encourage its commodification and deprive underprivileged communities of the right to conveniently access public space.

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1. Introduction

Urban open space is receiving increasing public attention in today's era of global urbanisation (Ward Thompson, 2002). Urban planners and designers are aware of the many positive contributions made by open space to the sustainability of human settlements (Chiesura, 2004). It can decrease the heat-island effect, ameliorate climate change and promote ecological biodiversity (Jauregui, 1991; Oishi, 2012; Nielsen, Bosch, Maruthaveeran, & van den Bosch, 2013; Frischenbruder and Pellegrino, 2006;

Feyisa, Dons, & Meilby, 2014; Skoulika, Santamouris, Kolokotsa, & Boemi, 2014). Open space also has a recreational function: it encourages physical exercise, supports social interaction and enhances public health (Sugiyama, Francis, Middleton, Owen, & Giles-Corti, 2010; Kazmierczak, 2013; Koohsari, Kaczynski, Giles-Corti, & Karakiewicz, 2013; Kemperman and Timmermans, 2014; Paquet et al., 2014). Open space is often an integral part of the urban landscape and a tourist attraction that generates economic value (Poudyal, Hodges, & Merrett, 2009; Ashworth and Page, 2011; Panduro and Veie, 2013). Despite its importance to cities, however, the logic underlying the planning and provision of urban open space has yet to be fully explored.

A key related question concerns the equity of open space distribution and access in cities. Do the rich and powerful have greater access to higher-quality open space than the poor and

* Correspondence to: Department of Urban Planning and Design, 8/F Knowles Building, University of Hong Kong, Pokfulam, Hong Kong.
 E-mail address: bsbstang@hku.hk

powerless? This research question is particularly pertinent to Hong Kong, a free-market society with high levels of economic inequality and a unique spatio-political environment. Hong Kong had been a British colony for more than 150 years before its sovereignty was returned to China in July 1997. The government has never been directly elected by the public. As a result, urban planning remains a top-down and rather bureaucratic process. All land belongs to the government and is allocated for private use under a leasehold system. Statutory zoning in town plans regulates the permissible uses of land. Hong Kong is a high-density, compact city, whose population of 7.3 million occupies a built-up area of only 24% of its total territory of 1100 sq. km. Zones designated as 'Open Space' constituted only about 2% of the city's area, and many were not developed for recreational use (Tang and Wong, 2008). Researchers have consistently criticised the unsatisfactory provision of urban open space in Hong Kong (e.g. Cuthbert and McKinnell, 1997; Jim, 1998; Lam, Ng, Hui, & Chan, 2005). However, no studies to date have examined the distribution of open space in Hong Kong at a spatially disaggregated level, evaluated its planning implications and critically explored the forces contributing to this outcome.

2. Motivation for and background of study

This study is intended to fill these research gaps. It is motivated by the increasingly vigorous pursuit of urban justice in Western cities, in which economic inequality and social exclusion have intensified enormously with the spread of market fundamentalism and neoliberalism over the past decades (Harvey, 1973). According to Fainstein (2010), the provision of widely accessible and varied public spaces promotes diversity, one of the three pillars of a just city (in addition to equity and democracy). However, many researchers have found that urban open space is inequitably distributed, leading to the marginalisation of disadvantaged communities, ethnic minorities and specific age groups (Byrne, Wolch, & Zhang, 2009; Dai, 2011; Byrne, 2012). Development pressure has further eroded such spaces, aggravating spatial disparity and differential access between privileged and underprivileged neighbourhoods (Kabisch and Haase, 2014; Wolch, Byrne, & Newell, 2014). More and more public open space has been privatised to house gated communities, commercial ventures, business improvement districts and other enterprises (Mitchell, 1995; Cybriwsky, 1999; Kayden, 2000; Turner, 2002; Low, 2003).

Understanding distributional inequity is only the first step towards addressing environmental injustice; it is also necessary to examine "the processes that construct maldistribution" (Schlosberg, 2007, p. 4). The phenomena of marginalisation and privatisation outlined above have emerged concurrently with a neoliberal shift in planning policy. The privatisation of public space has been supported by planning authorities on the grounds of limited public funding (Heckscher and Robinson, 1977), the devolution of the welfare regime (Atkinson, 2003; Steel and Symes, 2005), public-security concerns (Button, 2003; Brownlow, 2006), the rise of new modernity (Erkip, 2003), consumer preferences, court decisions (Kohn, 2004; Joyce, 2006) and improved resource allocation (Webster and Lai, 2003). Critics argue that planning practices are class biased, undemocratic, inefficient and socially destructive, overemphasising growth at the expense of other values (Fainstein, 2009).

The literature has suggested different strategies for redressing environmental injustice. Schlosberg (2007, p. 26) argues that "broad and authentic public participation" can achieve both "distributional equity and political recognition" (see also Jennings, Johnson-Gaither, & Gragg, 2012). Marcuse (2009) and Fainstein (2010) are hopeful that urban planning, despite its limitations, offers an influential and transformative tool for accomplishing the

normative vision of a just city. But, Scott (1998, pp. 342–349) is highly critical of the "optimistic views of progress and rational order" held by modernist planners, on the grounds that such views serve only to "facilitate the central administration of production and the control of public life". Others propose more radical approaches based on social mobilisation and political struggle, especially through the use of public space, to establish an alternative social order that goes beyond the capitalist regime of rights (Lefebvre, 2003; Mitchell, 2003; Harvey and Potter, 2009). Notwithstanding these arguments, it is generally agreed that the underlying power structure and relations play a crucial role in shaping the production of the built environment, which reinforces and perpetuates urban injustice (DeFillippis and Rivero, 2014).

Against this rich background of literature, Hong Kong offers an appropriate case for evaluating the issues of equity in the planning and distribution of public open spaces. Previously as a British colonial city and now a Special Administrative Region of China, Hong Kong has retained an executive-led and highly centralised government. The public has never had the right of direct elections of the government. Political power was hugely imbalanced between the ruler and the ruled, especially during the early colonial era in which the maintenance of political and social stability was paramount. Open space can be a place of political contests and social tensions (see, Carr, Francis, Rivlin, & Stone, 1992; van Rooijen, 2000; Law, 2002; Ooi and Hee, 2002). The *Public Places Regulation Ordinance* of 1870 gave the colonial government tremendous power to regulate unruly public behaviour, preserve good social order and exercise tight control of public life in the administration of public spaces. Provision of open space was therefore not immune from political considerations.

Similarly, the authority of spatial planning is firmly held by the government elites in regulating the spatial order. The government decision to allocate land in the town plans for public open space and other land-uses reflects its governing ideology, development priority and political values. Given the lack of formal political representation in Hong Kong, how are the interests of different social segments – the government versus the public, the rich versus the poor, those in power versus those being ruled – addressed in the city's spatial planning? Open space provides the lens to answer this query. DeFillippis (1997, p. 412) highlights the need to conceive of "a spectrum of different types of public spaces", because such spaces provide an implicit account of how the public is constituted. Does the distributional pattern of Hong Kong's public open space illustrate tacitly what public it is primarily intended to serve? How was the inequity redressed and evolved in the course of development of Hong Kong from a colonial city to an international metropolis? This study is intended to cast light on these issues.

3. Research questions, methodology and data

The main purpose of this study is to explain the spatial distribution of public open space in Hong Kong. It is guided by two main aspects of inquiry. First, what are the distinctive characteristics of the geographical distribution of open space in Hong Kong? Second, how does the distribution of open space reflect the values and rationale underlying spatial planning and the political forces behind it?

All data in this study are drawn from the public domain. Site-level data on both *actual* open space and *planned* open space in Hong Kong are assembled, due to discrepancies between these two types of open space (Tang and Wong, 2008). The first dataset comprises information on the existing public open spaces managed by the government's Leisure and Cultural Services Department (preceded by the Urban Services Department and the Regional Services Department). This information is drawn from the list of 'Public

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