

Instructor: Steven Fong



Hive of Dreams

In 1996 science fiction writer William Gibson coined the term “Hive of Dreams” to describe the adhoc settlement that had existed at the edge of Kowloon. Gibson was referencing the tightly packed residential “towerettes” that sprung upwards; and the jumble of unregulated uses, from factories to studios to restaurants and retail mixed into this settlement.

More colloquially known as Kowloon Walled City, this remarkable urban entity which arose organically post-1947 held the ignominious title as one of the world’s most dense human settlements. Its labyrinthian “streets” and cheek-by-jowl midrise buildings were completely unregulated (save for an assiduously maintained defined perimeter) by any municipal authority. This lack of regulation extended to all realms; and a myriad of socially undesirable activities were also embedded within its boundaries. For this reason, and other alibis, in 1993 the Hong Kong government levelled the neighborhood.

Still, there is much to learn from this walled city; what Gibson called the “crude subconscious schematic of the future”. There was a vibrant mix of habitation and enterprise; a residential enclave providing for homes with a brutal efficiency of land use that exceeded all western housing typologies; a platform for entrepreneurship and commerce that launched many successful companies; and an everyday world that somehow worked during its five decades of existence.

At its best the walled city as a provocation promises to yield a vibrant heterogeneity. The challenge of this studio is to navigate the design process to achieve positive outcomes; with responsibly configured and sized dwelling units, standards of habitation that are commensurate with our expectation in an advanced western city like Toronto; and programmatic overlaps that impart vibrancy without negative consequences.

References: <https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/kowloon-walled-city>