

# ENABLED BY DESIGN: ENQUIRY INTO THE LIVING PATTERNS OF HONG KONG HIGH-RISE COMMUNITIES

**Dr Yanki Lee<sup>1</sup>, Albert Tsang<sup>1</sup> and Dr Denny KL Ho<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>HKDI DESIS Lab for Social Design Research, Hong Kong Design Institute, yankilee@hotmail.com, albertiso@yahooo.com

<sup>2</sup>Applied Social Science, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, ssdenny@polyu.edu.hk

## ABSTRACT:

This paper also intends to explore the possibility of making this experience a foundation for future models of pedagogy. The learning processes mentioned would not only happen exclusively within the campus, but would also be open to the community and public. This paper reports the process and results of a survey developed as a collaboration between a design researcher in participation, design educators, a sociologist, local activists, design students and their families and friends. We discussed how this model could be an exploration for forming a community for enquiry. This process advocated the use of open enquiry, common tool creation and co-learning activity to carry out the research. This is an on-going process and we will discuss its latest development: from design education to civic education to create tools and platforms for an archive of Hong Kong lived-in homes.

## INTRODUCTION

Could there be a designerly way of enquiry for social situations? And what is the specificity of designerly ways of enquiry in design education? This paper reflects on the enabling process of sharing design language as a method to engage students and residents in articulating and understanding their living spaces. We aim to extend the historical approach of design education: '*designerly ways of knowing*' (Cross, 1982) which forms the discourse of how design becomes a discipline of enquiry.

This paper reports a recent project we studied about the living condition of public housing estates in Hong Kong. The whole process involved 40 design students at High Diploma level. They were asked to practice their architectural drawing technique and create spatial representations (floor plans and photos) to engage the residents (including themselves) to record the usages and designs of their homes in public housing estates. All the apartments they recorded are designed

and constructed in a similar way of being standardised and serialised; and the spaces produced are thus repeated and refined. The results are 100 floor plans that recorded the actual usage of the living units. These 100 cases reflect how the residents use everyday design thinking to interact with the constraints of these standardised spaces.

The emphasis of the discussion is on the co-creation process and enabling process of the enquiry. For co-creation, we mean that both parties would have input into the generation of knowledge. By sharing the design tools, both the designers (design students) and residents could benefit from the research process. Designers will be better informed about how their designs are actually 'used'; through enabling the public to engage with the design language. Residents would be better able to understand their homes in comparison with others in a similar situation.

As raised in the previous paper, we suggested that both social science and design have quite similar nature of being pragmatic and practical. But more the important part would be the differences between them, which make the interchange and cross-disciplinary research meaningful (Lee, et al., 2012). This paper wants to further enquire what exactly could designerly way of thinking and research provide for investigating social condition. And what is the specificity of designerly ways of enquiry in design education.

Residential tower blocks are forming the backdrop to many urban cities but we know very little about the private spaces within them. Unlike 'Post Occupancy Evaluation (POE)' studies by professionals that focus on process, functional and technical performance (RIBA, 2006), we set out a study that went behind the facades. We tried to explore the domestic interiors, observed and recorded how residents' responses to standard spaces and how they have affected their own living spaces. In POE studies, residents / occupiers / users are usually just one group of participants set amongst clients, designers, managers and other professionals. Studies that consider issues in terms of design are also rare. However, having more knowledge of how residents occupy their dwellings must be of use to designers and architects; better informing them of how their designs are 'used'. Research like this also helps ordinary members of the public to engage with the language of design and satisfy our curiosity to know more about the homes of others.

Based this rationale, we initiated a study with tutors from Interior Design, Landscape Architecture and Product Design and 40 of their High Diploma level students. They were asked to practice their architectural drawing technique and create spatial representations (floor plans and photos) to engage the residents (including themselves) to record the usages and designs of their homes in public housing estates (Figure 1). The results are 100 floor plans that recorded the actual usage of the living units. These 100 cases reflect how the residents use everyday design thinking to interact with the constraints of these standardised spaces.

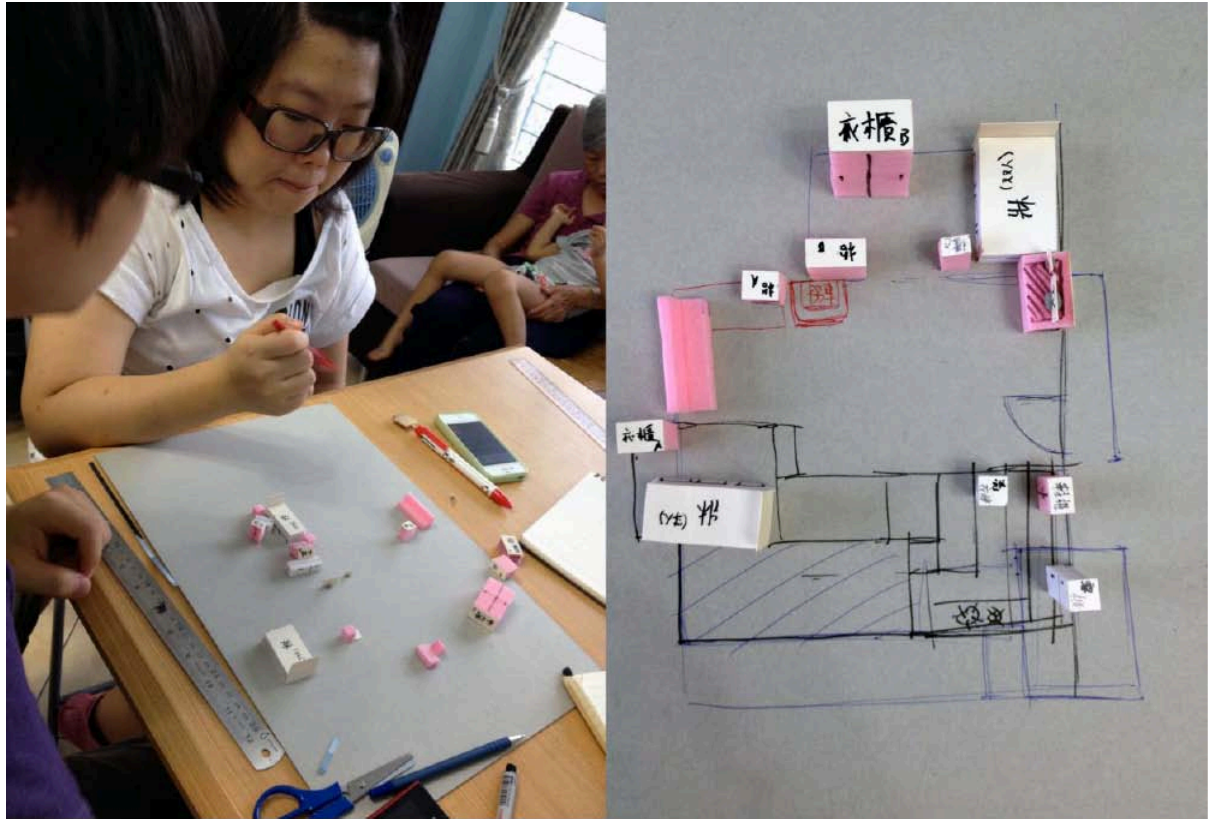


Figure 1. Research tool developed by students to engage people to actualize their home space

The roles of the design students in the study were multiple. First of all they were learning through applying their architectural drawing technique; and instead the usual practice of using drawings to depict spatial design, they also had to put this set of skill in a new context for comprehension. The students also had to view the drawing technique as an engaging and enquiry tool. They were also to a certain extent educators; they were in fact transferring the basic design language of design to the informants/residents, so that the residents could be aware and review their usage through the graphic representations.

## OPEN ENQUIRY OF RESIDENTS' RESPONSES

How do residents respond to standardised spaces to create their own homes? As Le Corbusier explained in his analogy of standardisation, "...[s]tandard components are letters; with those letters, in a particular way, you have to spell out the names of your future house owners" (Boudon, 1972). Residents are 'overwriting' the text laid down by the architect, creating 'designs by inhabitation'. This standardisation approach inspired diverse design participation concepts. One of them is the advocacy-planning concept, which encourages the positive role of citizens and works against the totalitarian formalisation of citizen participation. "The difficulty with current citizen participation programmes is that citizens are more often reacting to agency programmes than proposing their concepts of appropriate goals and future action" (Davidoff, 1965, 1996, p.392). A

good architectural example of advocacy-planning is the Byker redevelopment in Newcastle-upon-Tyne (1969-1975) where architect Ralph Erskine opened an on-site office to engage future tenants during the design process of their new homes. The Segal Method is another design participation example that was developed and introduced by UK architect Walter Segal in 1986. This flexible self-build system lets residents create their own designs and modify them over the years. It is an exemplar of architectural implementation of process-oriented design, which focuses on transforming the conventional route of architectural design whilst at the same time empowering passive users. After two decades of development, this method inspired the set-up of the Walter Segal Self Build Trust (WSSBT) to enable more people to build their own environments.

In architectural work the best known study to investigate this question is the one carried out by Philippe Boudon (1972) about Le Corbusier's Pessac settlement of 51 houses in the 1920's. As Lefebvre described the study, *"... a form of enquiry to introduce material that casts a new light on the problems posed by town planning and will help us to form a general assessment covering all aspects of this discipline, which is the only profitable way of tackling and perhaps solving these problems"*. As an architect, Boudon kept the study as an open enquiry rather than an assessment like POEs. He entitled the book, *Lived-in Architecture: "the universal quality of 'living' as revealed by the day to day activities of the occupants... in the building of houses"* (p.52). The main tool he used to record people's responses were transcripts of his intensive but non-directive interviews of different stakeholders.

More recently Luke Weldon Perry from UC-Berkeley conducted a survey that began in 2008 and looked at housing as a social agent of improvement and change. He described the work on his blog: *"[t]he Incremental House explores various relationships between low-cost housing, architecture, and social change...looking at how architects could play a significant role in helping people improve their housing without taking away their agency"*. Apart from revised Pessac, Perry went to engage residents living in Quinta Monroy, Chile; a project was developed by an architectural group ELEMENTAL in conjunction with the Chilean government. Similar to many social housing projects, their primary question was how to provide quality houses with a limited budget. Their tactic was to provide residents with a set of design rules and building guidelines that residents had to apply to half their property. They were then free to build the other half to suit their needs and any changes in their lives. Like Boudon, Perry went to conduct interviews with residents but he focused on the process of change: before and after. He created isometric drawings to show the processes by which residents build the other half of their homes over a period of time.

Whilst Boudon and Perry's studies relied on the reputation of famous architects involved with modernism's housing projects or developments within social architecture, our very modest enquiry similarly looks at how ordinary residents have adapted, inhabited, altered their given space and unlike those studies this is an architecture of anonymity.

## CREATING COMMON TOOL

*"For architects and clients, the floor plan is a special design aspect in which practice, conventions and prevailing social conceptions compete with the striving for modernisation and innovation, for adaption to new socio-cultural conditions and individual architectural and social-cultural aspirations"* (De Vreeze, 2000). Gaining access to ordinary people's homes for such a survey is a challenge. It involves both methodological and ethical questions. Much has been written about what have now become customary procedures for working with specific user groups and other kinds of focus groups. However, informants are still commonly treated as passive information providers for researchers. On the other hand, privacy was an issue for some residents and many of them were uncertain about their participation in the survey. With these two issues in mind this study aimed to involve residents in public housing estates as 'active partners'. Empathy was our main method when encouraging residents to see themselves as active partners rather than passive interviewees. Our tactic was to constantly refer to people's homes as our homes and emphasise that we are collectively mapping Hong Kong homes. Everyone was informed of the reasons that they were participating in a general architectural study of housing design in Hong Kong. Collectively we were gathering data, which would contribute to this book, ultimately sharing knowledge around designing and living.

To explain the results of a survey before it has been completed is a difficult task, to explain the hunch of the researcher is equally difficult, something about sharing the uncertainty of the experience, a common or shared exploration. Our solution was to create initial building type plans or 'the pattern book' to engage residents by explaining to them which type they were living in, sharing the language of design. Additionally, our students, data gatherers were armed with pre-drawn floor plans of other people's homes from similar units, which helped them to engage residents in more focused conversations. Additionally, another possible usage of the floor plan as a tool of communication is for readers to learn from others how to operate their given spaces.

## A CO-LEARNING PROCESS

This study refers to Ehn's (1998) way of how to use the meeting of language-games as a productive way of enabling participatory design:

1. Users have to understand the language game of design;

2. Users must be able to give complete explicit descriptions of their demands;
3. Designers have to understand the language games of the use activity.

As well as a learning process for the residents in terms of their participation in a survey, meaning they might contribute their ideas about how they live, the study also had valuable learning outcomes for the data gatherers. They were coached in how to conduct ethnographic research through a number of techniques. These included observation and asking relevant questions in order to collect data to make floor plans, understanding the relationship between the given outlined spaces and additions created by residents. They were also encouraged to create special tools for data capture. In particular, a group of residents who are wheelchair users were invited to be part of the process. This group was noticeably more open minded and showed a greater willingness to share their private space with visitors. Due to their special needs, most of them had designed and altered their interior spaces with input from physiotherapists, the Housing Authority, their landlord and housing managers. These residents have uniquely developed in-depth views of public housing design in Hong Kong and proved that they are 'competent social actors' rather than the expected opposite, outlined by Kyung (2012): "individuals are portrayed as being 'subordinate to the organising mechanisms of the unconscious' rather than 'competent social actors'" . Typically they modified the entrance, floor level, toilet and width of all the internal doors. Sharing design ideas by this group of residents was also a task for our students, because many of them had never met people with disability.

## FORMING A COMMUNITY OF ENQUIRY FOR THE FUTURE

It is not unusual for a tourist's impression of a city to be focused on the historical city centre, the entertainment district, and enduring 'brand' images of a place. Hong Kong is no exception. This study will hopefully contribute something to a contrasting picture of the ordinary architecture of housing that makes up the background to this city. It will help to dispel the often-romanticised view of Hong Kong by presenting a more accurate picture of the ordinariness of its urban life.

This data collection process was collaboration between a design researcher in participation, design educators, a sociologist, local activists, design students and their family and friends. The final result is a joint effort between housing design and participation research. Together, we created a book of architectural drawings that describe how people live in a particular kind of architecture – public housing: Hong Kong citizens' collective memory of public housing – where the majority of Hong Kong people have grown up in the past two to three decades. "It was the recognition of the validity of process over the sanctity of ideology. Few architects are capable of making that observation, because it speaks not to some fixed ideal, but to the complexity and incompleteness of architecture, to how life and art accommodate to each other" (Huxtable, 1981).

This study demonstrates the possibilities we can generate through designerly ways of enquiry and ultimately how we can create a blueprint for future action research projects. The project is thus our suggestion for future models of pedagogy. The learning processes mentioned would not only happen exclusively within the campus, but would also be open to the community and public.

*"You know, it is always life that is right and the architect who is wrong".* Le Corbusier's reflection indicated the importance of learning from people's ingenuity and how they created lived-in architecture. In this respect, this data collection process advocated the use of open enquiry, common tool creation and co-learning activity to conduct "a spiral of steps, each of which is composed of a circle of planning, action and fact-finding about the result of the action" (Lewin, 1946). The designerly enquiry heavily involves design languages, which invited the users/residents to articulate and review their living space through practical terms. The residents ceased to remain mere informants and have the opportunity to engage in active exchange with the designers with the set of language that restrain and enable their everyday lives.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank all participated students from the Hong Kong Design Institute. This project could not have happened without support from HKDI DESIS Lab for Social Design Research, The paper was inspired by the publication, *Patterns of Living* (ISBN 978-988-12324-4-1, published by New Talent Press). Special thanks for Hilary French, co-author of the book and all the residents who opened their homes for the survey.

## REFERENCES:

- Boudon, P. (1972). *Lived-In Architecture: Le Corbusier's Pessac Revisited*. MIT Press
- Cross, N. (1982). 'Designerly ways of knowing'. *Design studies* 3 (4): 221–227
- De Vreeze. (2000). 'Floor Plans between Convention and Innovation'. In Kloos & Wendt (Eds), *Formats for Living: Contemporary floor plans in Amsterdam*. Amsterdam: Architectura & Natura Press.
- Davidoff, P. (1965, 1996). 'Advocacy and Pluralism in Planning' from *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*. In *The City Reader*. London and New York: Routledge, p.388-398.
- Ehn, P. (1998). *Work-oriented Design of Computer Artefacts*. Stockholm: Almquist & Wiksell International.
- Kyung Wook Seo. (2012). 'DNA of the House: A Hidden Dimension in the Development of Domestic Space in Seoul', *Home Cultures, Berg Journals*, Vol 9 Issue 1, p.79.
- Lee Y & Ho D K (2012), 'Design.Lives: Designing for the politics of self-actualisation'. *DesignEd Asia*, Hong Kong, 2012.
- Lewin, K. (1946). 'Action research and minority problems'. *Journal of Social Issues* 2(4): 34-46.
- RIBA. (2006). *Guide to Post Occupancy Evaluation*. UK: HEFCE.

Huxtable. (1981). Le Corbusier's Housing Project- Flexible Enough To Endure. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/1981/03/15/arts/architecture-view-le-corbusier-s-housing-project-flexible-enough-endure-ada.html?pagewanted=all> [accessed on the 22nd May 2013].

Perry, L.W. (2008). Chile. Quinta Monroy. Retrieved from <http://incrementalhouse.blogspot.co.uk/2008/10/chile-quinta-monroy.html> [accessed on the 26th May 2013].  
<http://www.ymag.it/schede.asp?id=3374> [accessed on the 26th May 2013]