

Stair Culture: Defining pedestrian infrastructure in Hong Kong

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As part of the everyday landscape of mountainous Hong Kong, outdoor stairways play a critical role in creating a permeable and accessible public realm. Embedded in hillsides, stacked on sidewalks or replacing streets and alleys altogether, Hong Kong's ubiquitous stairs are a reflection of the diverse character of the city itself. Obliquely defined by the city as utilitarian uphill access routes, Hong Kong stairs are often designed and maintained with function and frugality in mind even though they number among the oldest remaining built insertions in the city, some dating back to the 1840's. Besides those built recently as a planning gain associated with lot redevelopment, consolidated documentation concerning stairways is limited to the few deemed Monuments due to their relatively intact material condition (e.g. Colonial Duddell Street Steps in Central) or to those given graded Built Heritage status for their historical role in the development of the city (e.g. Ladder Street or Pottinger Street in ShuengWan/Central). However, beyond those with or deserving of heritage status, there are hundreds of other stairways in Hong Kong which also play a vital urban role as pedestrian and community infrastructure, serving as market places, ephemeral gathering spots, secret short-cuts or quiet rest areas away from vehicular traffic. Drawing on student work from an applied research seminar at the University of Hong Kong and supported by mapping and archival research, first hand observation, interviews and community workshops, this paper examines the role of the stairway in Hong Kong history, culture, and urban development and argues for its recognition as a significant pedestrian infrastructural typology worthy of public, heritage, and municipal recognition and documentation. This recognition would help not only to preserve and protect the historic fabric of the stairways and their adjacent communities, but also to further develop their untapped potential as meeting, gathering, and commercial spaces which prioritize the movement of pedestrians through local communities.

Keywords: Stairs ; Hong Kong ; Pedestrian infrastructure ; Heritage