

BORDER STORIES: OPENING HONG KONG'S FRONTIER TERRITORY

Joshua Bolchover, University of Hong Kong

The paper will describe emerging spatial phenomenon that have arisen as a result of the complex urban dynamics occurring across the Hong Kong and Shenzhen border in Southern China. This border currently operates to separate political ideologies; economic systems; citizen identities and rights and social structures. Unlike other peripheral city conditions this border is an extreme case; as Hong Kong thins out and becomes more rural it is bound by the dense urban edge of Shenzhen. The coexistence of the core and the periphery in such close vicinity is a unique urban morphology resulting from the historical evolution of both cities. A legacy of this evolution is the Frontier Closed Area – a buffer zone and police protected no man's land that was set up by the British in 1951 to stem illegal migration and smuggling from the Mainland – that has been closed off to the public until very recently.

On February 15th 2012, 61 years after it was created, this zone was partially opened. A residual space that has developed its own ecosystem and natural habitat, the land pressures from both Hong Kong and Shenzhen now make this land extremely desirable for development. What could the future use of this area be? How could it provide an urban interface that could support the needs of the citizens of both Shenzhen and Hong Kong? How will the tension between private ownership, economic growth and public space be negotiated? How could the uses of the area adapt and change to each city's future development as they grow closer towards unification? The dual impetus of Chinese economic reform that commenced in the late 1970s together with "handover" and the establishment of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region in 1997 has meant that both cities have become increasingly codependent. Each urban system has become reliant on the other for specific forms of exchange that include drinking water; capital; waste disposal; material and knowledge. As such, the future of the Frontier Closed Area represents a critical juncture in the acceptance or rejection of the creation of a conjoined Hong Kong-Shenzhen Metropolis.

The paper will argue that the future of the FCA should harness the unique dynamics and spatial conditions that have evolved through the inherent differences between both cities. These are manifested through narratives of this in-between space: Parallel traders travel back and forth between the two cities laden with goods desired from either side; pregnant mothers transit to Hong Kong to give birth to guarantee citizen status for their newborns; border school children from Shenzhen cross the border daily to be educated; farmers in Shenzhen use informal border crossings to access agricultural land; or truck operators illegally dump containers creating scarred landscapes in Hong Kong. The paper will describe each story and their spatial implications and propose how these relationships could give rise to a new form of urbanism - an Open City - for this zone that prioritizes the construction of a unique and mutually beneficial urban ecology.