



McPublic Spaces: McDonald's' appropriation of the *everyday* place in Hong Kong

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This paper analyses the role of McDonald's in Hong Kong as a consumption-oriented place where the production of social space happens under the constraints of the market's spectacle and speculations. McDonald's in Hong Kong have evolved from the original aesthetics of the company, with a colorful postmodern cafeteria look, to the latest concept "Next" with a bold design, neat materiality, touch screens and open layout. Throughout this process, its restaurant design and policies have evolved by appropriating the rhythms of the city and its citizens. Whereas Hong Kong's city escape is commonly perceived as the product of top down strategies carried out by "coalitions" between public institutions and private corporations, McDonald's offers a case study of informal activities influencing the way a global enterprise develops. Its new "Next" concept might be seen as an attempt to anticipate informality. Two opposing ideas underlie this "open look": the aim to homogenize customers through the sanitation of the space, versus the provision of neutral spaces to allow for the occurrence of heterogeneity. The presence of the screen as an intermediary between the restaurant and its customers empowers a dichotomy between an impersonal fast food service and current paradigms that aim to prioritize people and food.

Keywords: cross-cultural, globalization, everyday spaces, public & private, spaces of appropriation vs spaces of domination

Introduction

The pressure of high property prices forces a great percentage of Hong Kongese to live and work under poor conditions. This fact, combined with the lack of effective open public spaces in the city, has empowered the rise of places of consumption as an extension of domestic and professional realms. In this context, McDonald's has played a crucial role in the integration of everyday activities into spaces of consumerism in Hong Kong since 1975. This interiorization and appropriation of the "public" by multinational corporations is part of a larger process in the city initiated in the 1970s, primarily in shopping malls.

Social scientists refer to public space through two main ideas: accessibility and the public sphere as a place for communal dialogue¹. In terms of accessibility, there are 244 McDonald's' restaurants strategically distributed in the most populated areas of Hong Kong of which 116 are opened 24hours². Its access appears hardly restricted; users range from families with children, to high school students, construction workers, domestic helpers or groups of elderly people. Moreover, Hong Kong and Mainland China McDonald's have been known in recent years for letting homeless people, referred as "McRefugees", sleep in their restaurants. The prefix Mc has been used over the past decades to create neologisms, often following pejorative connotations associated with McDonald's. This paper's title "McPublic" refers to contemporary spaces of consumption that make up an essential background for everyday life.

As a place for dialogue, it is particularly relevant the influence of its interior design's playful mood combined with intense branding strategies in people's behaviour and habits. McDonald's Hong Kong has evolved from its first restaurants emulating the American colorful postmodern touch of the brand in the 1970s, to the world's first McDonald's Next, a drastic new concept with a bold design, pure clean materials such as concrete, wood or steel, touch screens and open layout³. Along this process, McCafé was incorporated in Hong Kong in 1999 and, recently, healthier and Create Yourself menus have been implemented in accordance to current trends.

This study will take into consideration: users, workers, designers and the corporation, in order to understand how McDonald's has assimilated and appropriated the everyday into its capitalist consumer strategies where private and public ambiguity arises.



Public & private ambiguity

Public space and low standard living conditions

There are two key factors that contribute to the proliferation of private third places in Hong Kong as substitutes of public and domestic scopes: the characteristics of its public space and the living standards of its residences⁴.

Rampant growth and privatization of the public realm for the benefit of big corporations, have turned public spaces in the city into residual areas: narrow sidewalks, overcrowded squares or parks whose access is hindered by big infrastructures, as an example. Moreover, these spaces are often restricted and surveilled⁵. On the other hand, housing average areas and living standards in Hong Kong are remarkably low. According to Hong Kong's Government, the average living space per person in 2013 for Public Rental Housing was less than 13sqm.⁶ The dimensions in the case of informal subdivided flats can decrease down to 4.5sqm.⁷ These minimal conditions often force people to find a third space as a substitute of their living and working places.

Privatization of public space

As a consequence of its development-oriented urban dynamics, Hong Kong has relied on the private sector to provide public space provision to the city. The most common form under which these spaces are developed is POPS (Privately Owned Public Space). Originated in New York in 1960, this concept was adopted by Hong Kong Government in the 1980s due to its rapid economic growth⁸. The synergy between local state and corporate strategies in Hong Kong is particularly significant as the government is the landowner as well as the lawmaker⁹. The intentional manipulation of planning systems in order to favor big corporations has created an efficient "Bureaucratic society of controlled consumption" that shapes Hong Kong social space¹⁰.

Whereas in the case of POPS the public use of a private space is institutionalized, there are numerous cases where this boundary is ambiguous. A crucial factor that intensified this ambiguity was the upswing of the shopping mall in the 1970s in Hong Kong; this process of interiorization and privatization of public spaces meant a radical change in everyday life of space¹¹. In opposition to some negative characteristics of open public spaces such as adverse weather conditions or poor accessibility, these private spaces are safe, organized, located in strategic points of the city linked to a subway station and provide a comfortable environment. Moreover, the rise of a consumer culture brought new lifestyles and aspirations.

McDonald's in Hong Kong

Hong Kong in the 1970s

The first McDonald's, opened in Hong Kong in 1975, was located in Paterson Street, Causeway Bay. The landing of the big franchise coincided with a period of unprecedented economic and demographic growth after WWII. The city was transiting from being a second sector-based economy to a financial and high-technology industries center where shopping malls and offices were being built at a frantic rhythm¹². Fast food culture was not a new phenomenon in Hong Kong. The intense rhythm of the city, long working hours and commuting time meant that people often consumed take away food. Thousands of street food vendors delivered food day and night during the 1960s and the 1970s. The first step to the corporatization of street food was carried out by Café de Coral in 1968 by incorporating fast food into clean and nicely decorated interior spaces¹³. This company is currently one of the main competitors of McDonald's in Hong Kong with 150 outlets. In this context, McDonald's found optimal conditions to enter the local market: one year after its first restaurant, McDonald's set foot in Kowloon with a restaurant in Yau Ma Tei. In 1981, McDonald's in Kwun Tong beat the world record of daily transactions¹⁴.

In parallel to the development of shopping malls, the restaurant chain gradually transitioned from being an exotic place, especially for young people wishing to be part of a popular culture, to a common meeting point in everyday routines, where not only fast food was offered but a place to stay¹⁵. The strategy of McDonald's' first Manager in Hong Kong, Daniel Ng, was not to compete with local food restaurants but to stick to their original American menu and aesthetics. According to Watson, McDonald's also played an important role in Hong Kong by setting new standards of cleanliness, particularly in toilets, and people's discipline, such as queuing while waiting to order¹⁶. Moreover, McDonald's offered a safe space, free of triads, alcohol or cigarettes, to young people. This whole process can be considered as a "McDonalization" of Hong Kong's society in the terms used by Ritzer of "efficiency, predictability, calculability, substitution of nonhuman for human technology and control over



uncertainty”¹⁷. The international debut of the latest concept Next in Hong Kong indicates the naturalization of the brand in the city.

Hong Kongese habits

A closer look at the specificities of Hong Kong in comparison to United States suggests some important differences in people’s habits. Whereas in the United States 70% of Mcdonald’s’ sales come from drive-thru, in Hong Kong this service is not offered and its home delivery service accounts for less than 20% of its transactions in Hong Kong¹⁸. In the United States, the average eating time in fast food industries is 11 minutes and in Hong Kong 20 to 25 minutes; in addition to this, Hong Kongese often consider Mcdonald’s meal as a snack before eating at home¹⁹. These facts denote a social component involved in Mcdonald’s consumers in Hong Kong.

Ubiquity in the city

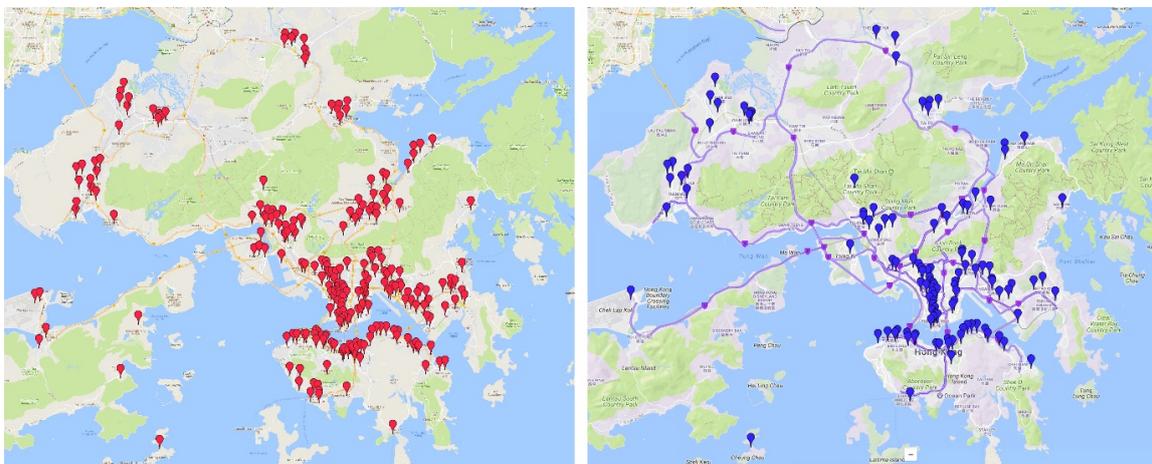


Figure 1. Caro, Diego. *Map of Mcdonald's outlets in Hong Kong. Day(red) and 24h(blue)*. [Hong Kong 2017]

There are currently 244 Mcdonald’s’ restaurants strategically distributed in Hong Kong, of which 116 are open 24 hours. There is a Mcdonald’s situated within a radius of 500 meters in 83 out of 91 MTR stations, and, in the proximities of the outlets, intense signage is carried out in different forms in relation to street’s typologies.

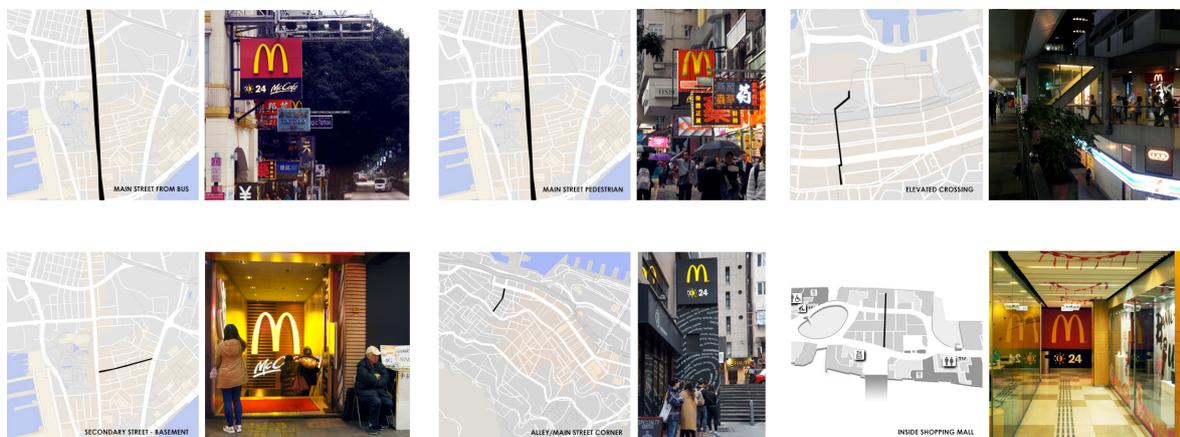


Figure 2. Caro, Diego. *Diagrams of Mcdonald's' signage in Hong Kong*. [Hong Kong: 2017]



Among its restaurants, McDonald's located in residential areas are particularly successful. In 1992, 7 out of the 10 busiest McDonald's in the world were in Hong Kong and 5 of them were located in residential areas of the city (Kowloon Bay, Tsuen Wan, Shatin, Tuen Mun and in Kwun Tong)²⁰. Moreover, the corporation is also visible in the city landscape through the sponsorship of events, charity campaigns and community services²¹.

McDonald's and Real Estate

The omnipresence of McDonald's in the city is intrinsically connected to the corporation's real estate business strategies²². McDonald's' real estate properties worldwide are worth more than \$31 billion, from which it gets more than \$5 billion revenue annually²³. This means that the corporation makes most of its profits from acquiring outlets and subletting them to its franchisees. Since its origins in Hong Kong, McDonald's has had close relationship with banks and developers. The first restaurant in the city was opened by one of the three sons of the co-founder of the Bank of East Asia. Most recently, in 2017, 80% of McDonald's China & Hong Kong shares were bought by CITIC and Carlyle groups in an attempt to set more localized directions. The first steps of the new owners were several deals with some of the most important Chinese Real Estate developers such as China Evergrande Group, China Overseas Land & Investment Ltd. or China Vanke Co., whereby McDonald's will be the first retailer to see new developments so as to decide the location for their future investments²⁴.

Notwithstanding, real estate speculation has also negatively affected McDonald's' locations in Hong Kong. High prices in rents, that in some cases tripled in the past 40 years, have forced iconic outlets like the first McDonald's in Paterson Street to relocate. The main reason behind this increase is the rampant emergence of high-end retails that respond to the increasing demand of these products by Mainland Chinese tourists according to property consultants²⁵.

McWorld: McKids, McGamers and McRefugees

Kid's loyalty programs

The McWorld alters the physical space of the city as well as its citizens²⁶. Through intense loyalty campaigns, McDonald's has targeted kids since the first appearance of Ronald McDonald in 1963. In Hong Kong, these controversial marketing strategies have had a strong impact in the way they enjoy their leisure time as well as the way they perceive leisure space in the past years. McDonald's has developed specific spatial practices focused on children, from a Toys Museum to a restaurant designed from drawings done by kids²⁷. The kids that celebrated their birthday parties in a McDonald's in the 1980s and 1990s get married nowadays in the same outlets²⁸.

Whereas the idea of kids' indoctrination suggests that McDonald's uses marketing as a mechanism of control, top down strategies, other groups of people, like McGamers or McRefugees, have played an unexpected role in McDonald's creating bottom-up informal situations that the corporation have somehow absorbed.

McGamers

Albeit originated in Japan, McGamers were probably the first big phenomenon of informal overstays taking shape inside McDonald's outlets in Hong Kong. Their presence increased dramatically after the release of PlayStation Portable (PSP) in 2005 and, particularly, the game Monster Hunter. The need of physical proximity between gamers due to Bluetooth connection, and electric outlets where people would connect several devices to a power strip, plus the possibility of enjoying an informal environment to gather and make controlled noise far from school or home, brought a vast amount of teenagers inside McDonald's.

Nowadays, whereas physical proximity is not required due to the spread of the internet, McDonald's has done a good use of the ideas acquired from McGamers by offering charging stations for mobile phones or free Wi-Fi. The recent video game phenomenon PokemonGo in 2016 was also taken advantage of by the corporation in Japan with more than 3000 restaurants in the country introducing virtual gyms in their interiors. Quickly, other companies, including Starbucks, followed this trend²⁹.



McRefugees

Hong Kong and Mainland China McDonald's have been broadly known in recent years through media for letting homeless people sleep in their restaurants³⁰. According to Homeless Outreach Population Estimation organized by City University of Hong Kong in 2015, 254 people were reported to stay overnight in fast food restaurants. In reference to McRefugees, McDonald's Hong Kong expressed in an official statement that the company welcomes all walks of life to visit their restaurants any time and that tries to be accommodating and caring to customers who overstay³¹.

McDonald's restaurant design evolution

For over 50 years, McDonald's has transited from a fast food chain in the United States focused on automobile culture with basic and cheap menus and decoration to a more sophisticated restaurant offering coffee, bakery or customized salads. The influence of external factors has played a decisive role in the evolution of its marketing strategies and restaurant design. Among them: competitors such as Starbucks or KFC, food health issues, anti-capitalistic movements, workers' protests, real estate market, new technologies or changing practices of customers. Throughout these years, two milestones have affected drastically the restaurant's interior design in Hong Kong: The incorporation of McCafé and the recent McDonald's 'Next' concept.

First restaurants

The first McDonald's' restaurants developed in the United States had a postmodern cafeteria look where the golden rings were a predominant element within a white and red background. The building became a sign, as some of the case studies shown in *Learning From Las Vegas*³². Venturi and Scott Brown themselves also designed a McDonald's in Buenavista, Florida in 1990, that can be consider as a paradigmatic example of this original trend. The first McDonald's in Hong Kong was designed in a similar fashion and just a few of this first generation of McDonald's were kept until recent years. One of them was the recently closed McDonald's in Kwun Tong that, after 30 years running, had become an icon within the neighborhood. The renovation of this McDonald's stayed on hold for many years due to urban speculation uncertainty becoming a short of vintage place³³.

McCafé

The first McCafé in Hong Kong opened in 1999 in Wing Shan McDonald's in Sheung Wan. This new service meant a crucial change in the restaurant's design and atmosphere that became more playful yet sophisticated. Warm materials were introduced as well as colorful wallpapers and furniture. Regarding the spatial distribution, semi-enclosed spaces were generated by variations in furniture elements, some of them fixed, as well as the disposition of vertical elements such as wooden louvers. Different conceptual designs for different areas of the city and for different customers. McDonald's' design catalogue in Hong Kong proposes different moods for its restaurants: Allegro, Fresh& Vibrant, Simply Modern, Living Room or Craft, among others³⁴.



Figure 3. "Minimal", "Public & Hub Metro" and "Form & Allegro" interior concepts. McDonald's. <http://www.mcdonalds.com.hk/en.html> (Accessed November 20, 2017)

This evolution can be considered as a result of the competition for the third place market with companies like Starbucks. This corporation arose dramatically and expanded internationally in the 1990s, with its first outlet opened in Hong Kong just one year after the implementation of McCafé in the city³⁵.



McDonald's NEXT

The most recent concept 'Next' was first implemented in Hong Kong in 2015³⁶. Its design was carried out by the Australian firm Landini Associates. This new restaurant's style varies considerably from the previous concept: grey is now the predominant color; wallpapers display stylized quasi architectural drawings of McDonald's classic menus; vertical partitions disappear; and light fixtures become subtle elements of space distribution offering a more open space where most of the areas are visually connected. Comfortable and homogeneous furniture, totally moveable, ranging from black fabric and metal in the case of seating elements, to concrete or wood for the tables, where some phone charging points are incorporated. Cooking spaces and McCafé open up with wide glass surfaces and stainless steel. And lastly, the implementation of touch screens where customers can order and pay their meals as a key element of this new design. The main idea behind its design is "to create memorable places of commune where people and food are the key actors"³⁷.



Figure 4. Landini Associates. *McDonald's NEXT in Admiralty*. [Hong Kong: 2015]

Case Study: Mei Foo McDonald's

The case study chosen is located in the ground level of Mound Sterling Mall in Mei Foo Sun Chuen Estate. This residential estate, built between 1968 and 1978, is one of the largest private housing developments in the world³⁸. This outlet, with a built surface of 490sqm, was first opened in 1989 and renovated into the new 'Next' design in early 2017. This McDonald's was one of the first in the world, together with Admiralty and Smithfield branches, to offer wedding ceremonies.

The research method consisted of data collection from observation in the outlet. The field work was carried out for 4 weeks in the months of November and December 2017, with a total of 4 visits. During the observations, notes were taken about customers considering 4 different factors: gender, age group, consumption and activities. Remarks in relation to the spatial distribution of users were also noted.

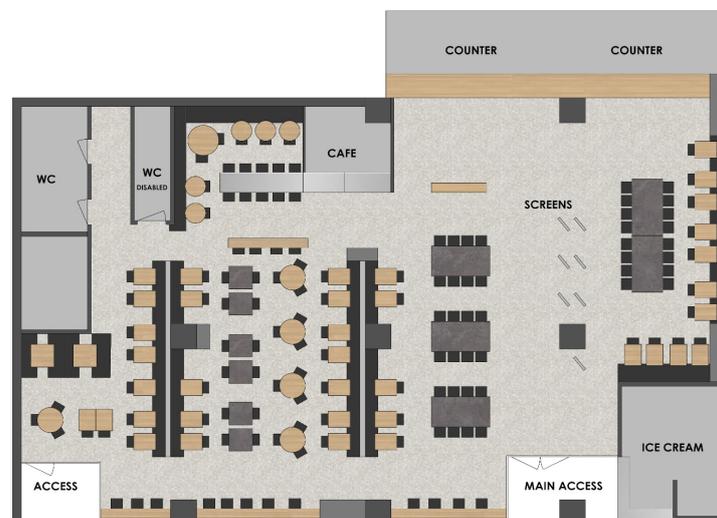


Figure 5. Caro, Diego. *Mei Foo McDonald's estimated floorplan*. [Hong Kong: 2017]



Several suggestions derived from the results:

McDonald's targets a greatly wide range of age groups and these are distributed along different days of the week and times of the day. During weekday mornings, groups of elderly chatting are predominant whereas, in the late afternoon, the main users are high school students doing their homework or talking while having a snack. At night, mainly middle-aged men having a drink after the workday. Another important factor is that a higher percentage of people were involved in a conversation than people using their phones, although both activities were predominant. During weekdays, a high percentage of people can be spotted working, holding job meetings or doing their homework in the case of young students. Most of these customers are regulars and live, work or study in the area.

During the observations, a remarkable percentage of the visitors overstayed or did not consume. This figure was particularly high on Sunday afternoons reaching 35%. This fact might be explained due to the working schedule of domestic helpers whose free day is, normally, on Sunday. The percentage of female visitors during that day was over 65%. During the research, 2 McRefugees were spotted. 2 women were seen in every occasion sitting and sleeping in the same location, next to the secondary access.



Figure 6. Caro, Diego. McDonald's Mei Foo. Data collection charts. October/November 2017. [Hong Kong: 2017]



Conclusions

From 1975, McDonald's has transited from being an "exotic" American brand to becoming a regular place in Hong Kongese's everyday life. Through a thoroughly studied evolution of its restaurants' design and locations, menus, advertising campaigns and community involvement, the company has managed to absorb the diversity of the city and its culture as well as to mitigate opposing forces.

McDonald's' market studies provide the corporation a great capacity to foresee and react to consumer's trends beforehand, assimilating the rhythms of the society in order to later control them. The efficiency of the private model of market research and anticipation suggests that, often, private spaces of consumption have a higher capacity to engage with society than public places. The latest restaurant concept "Next" might be seen as a step towards the appropriation, sanitation and control of informality, a McDonalization of society versus unpredictability and uncertainty. McDonald's has abandoned its original colourful look giving way to an austere design of its outlets and some of their locations have been displaced from the main spots of the city, yet its omnipresence has not been compromised; the brand has impregnated the everyday conscience of its customers. Behind the neutral appearance of its newest restaurant design, a filtered reality empowers a dichotomy between what seems to pursue current paradigms and trends that aim to prioritize food and people and an impersonal fast food service focused on maximizing profits.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Diego Caro is a PhD student at the Department of Architecture of the University of Hong Kong. His area of research focuses on urban and social issues regarding public & private spaces, everyday life and spaces of domination and contestation. After obtaining a MArch from the University of Navarra in 2010, he worked for over 7 years as architect and urban planner in renowned offices of Madrid, Tokyo, Beijing and Shanghai, including Kengo Kuma & Associates, Neri & Hu and Brearley Architects & Urbanists where he implemented "Networks Cities" concepts in the coordination of different urban master plans.

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