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Houses Like Water: Observations and Reflections on House Types of Kat O Fishing Village in Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

Liquid Homes: Building, Living and Other Stories of Hong Kong Fishing Villages is a research, curatorial, and design collaboration that explores the culture of Tanka people and their fluid state of living and building, presenting stories from a long overdue reading of the other Hong Kong. This essay, as an ongoing work, intends to reflect on our recent observations of the houses in Kat O fishing village by documenting the self-built additions in relation to the surrounding topography and water environment. These findings evoke an understanding of houses as "amphibious creatures" of hybrid qualities riding on the seams between land and water, and denote the notion of homes as "fluid entities"—physical yet elusive, subject to the floating identity of the community. The research intends to offer an ethnographic reading of Hong Kong coastal settlements and their building typologies, rethink building materialities by their temporal qualities and beyond the physical matter, and imagine a renewed reading on the dialectical relation between the built and the natural, and propose new ways to design sustainable architecture through the landscape.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Searches for new building typologies through ethnographical documentations
- Explores how coastal residents construct, maintain, and rebuild homes under land scarcity
- A new method to consider the amphibious qualities of coastal village houses
- Rethinks the materialities of houses by temporal qualities

KEYWORDS

Hong Kong;
Fishing Village;
Tanka People;
Fishermen Houses;
Water-Land Relationship;
Liquid Homes

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1 Introduction

Liquid Homes is a design, research, and curatorial collective that explores the building, living, and other stories of Hong Kong fishing villages. Combining field documentation, oral histories, and typological analysis, our research journey since winter 2020 has kept moving between the villages at different "ends" of the city—Tai O (大澳), Kat O (吉澳), and Po Toi O (布袋澳). This essay is a reflection of this research "on the move," particularly of the recent observations in Kat O fishing village (Fig. 1). It focuses on one specific relationship—house and water—and considers the agential nature of water in the rethinking of architectural typology and in the resistance of terrestrocentrism in contemporary planning and design.

1. Drone photo of Kat O Island, 2021.
2. Drone photo of Kat O "Hakka" village of land people, 2021.
3. Drone photo of Kat O "Tanka" village of boat people, 2021.

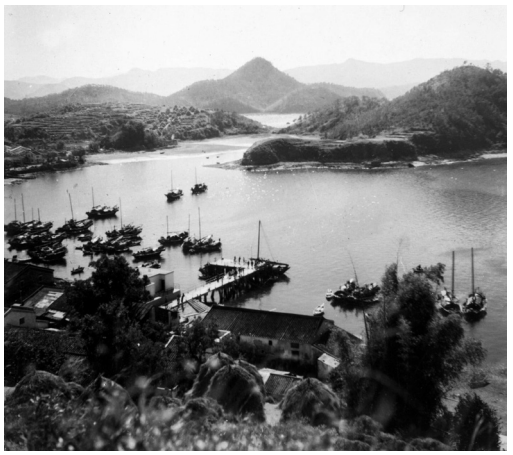
2 Kat O: A Natural History

Located in the west of Mirs Bay and east of Sha Tau Kok (沙头角), Kat O used to be home to several thousands of villagers more than 300 years ago. The Coastal Evacuation Order practised between 1662 and 1668 forced the inhabitants out, and it was not until the 19th century that the "Hakka" land people and "Tanka" boat people moved back to the island. With its distinct landscape and unique location, Kat O has historically served as a marketplace for both its own communities and the villages around the Starling Inlet or Sha Tau Kok Hoi (沙头角海), and eventually became an important harbor for people traveling between Hong Kong and Chinese mainland during both the Qing Dynasty and colonial rule period. Since 1951, Kat O as a part of the Sha Tau Kok area was the Frontier Closed Area between Hong Kong and the mainland. Developments were tightly controlled within the area, leading to that most of the area becomes a natural habitat for animals and plants. Since 2006, the HKSAR (Hong Kong Special Administrative Region) government proposed to incrementally relax the border control of the area, and tourist groups are allowed to enter with special permits since the summer of 2022.

In geographical terms, "O" (澳) refers to an indentation of a shoreline enclosing a body of seawater, a natural enclave for boat people to shelter from storms. Whether forced or voluntary, these appropriated coastlines of cultures and natures would be fused into a networked panoply of landscapes.

On the village map near the Kat O public pier and its waiting area Rongshutou (榕树头), a land–water divide between the "Hakka" and "Tanka" villages on Kat O Island is clearly marked. The so-called "Hakka" villages on the island today are located towards the southeast of the pier, using the inner bay as a natural shelter for the settlements (Fig. 2). Over the past centuries, the "Hakka" villagers further extended their territories into the hills and cultivated the land into terraced agricultural fields. The so-called Kat O fishing village of "Tanka" people, the focus of the study, is located on the opposite side towards the northwest of the pier, occupying a small stretch of flat land between the hill and the sea (Fig. 3). Although geographically more exposed to tides and storms, its easy access to open water makes it a natural ground for water people to repair boats, install fishing rafts, and eventually, build houses.

One may argue that such divides of land and water, "Hakka" and "Tanka" are informed by the geographical conditions of the island. A further investigation of the cultural landscapes of the villages may prove otherwise. In his study of the Kat O Festival and cultural rituals on the island, Choi Chi Cheung pointed out that the so-called "Hakka" villages in Kat O were likely to be the early generations of water people moving ashore.[1] Choi's study also coincided with Patrick H. Hase's historical analysis of the Alliance of Ten[2], a Hakka defense/economic alliance established by Hakka villages around the Starling Inlet, of which the Kat O village was left out because they



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4-1. Kat O in the 1950s, looking towards the "Hakka" village of land people: the fishermen's boats were docked near the village pier, and the low hills were cultivated into terraced rice fields.
4-2. Drone photo of Kat O "Hakka" village of land people, 2021.
4-3. Kat O in the 1950s: village houses were built along the main street; the site on the north side of the pier (the upper right part of the photo) for today's so-called "fishing village" still appeared to be a tidal flat.
4-4. Drone photo of Kat O "Tanka" village of boat people, 2021.

were considered as a "Tanka" community and, therefore, denied the civil right of joining the Alliance. These earlier generations of water people moving ashore would gradually appropriate the Hakka traditions, imitating the lifestyles of the nearby Hakka communities around the Starling Inlet, and even adopt their name, in order to establish and legitimize their social status when later generations of water people started to move ashore (Fig. 4). Similar patterns were also observed by Babara E. Ward in her anthropological study of Hong Kong's Tanka people on Kau Sai Island during the 1950s: as the Tanka occupied a marginalized status in the Qing's social hierarchy, very few Tanka people received a formal education, and they were forbidden to sit in the Imperial examinations.[3] Historian David Faure and anthropologist Helen F. Siu borrowed Ward's "conscious model" theory, and further argued for a dynamic understanding of the South China coastline communities in relation to the constantly shifting, changing, and overlapping socio-political frameworks of the region.[4] This "history" of appropriation and reappropriation of identities between land and water can be interpreted as "natural history," as coined by Donald Worster to see "history" not as the dead and static, but as an "ecology," presenting the village as an evolving landscape in continual change, unfolding the intricately intertwined relationships at the liminal zones along the coastline.[5]

3 Amphibious Houses: A Typological Analysis

Worster's notion of "natural history" was partly stemmed from Julian Steward's "cultural ecology" approach—he suggested to study the environmental influences on the "cultural core," i.e. "the constellation of features which are most clearly related to subsistence activities and economic activities"[6], with three steps. First, examining the technologies for the production of living; second, analyzing their patterns; and third, asking what effect the work behavior patterns have on other domains of cultures—in this case, the design of houses and the evolving notion of home.

We brought Steward's method when visiting the Kat O fishing village, but we also have to adapt it in response to the unique conditions on the island. At first glance, the village presents itself


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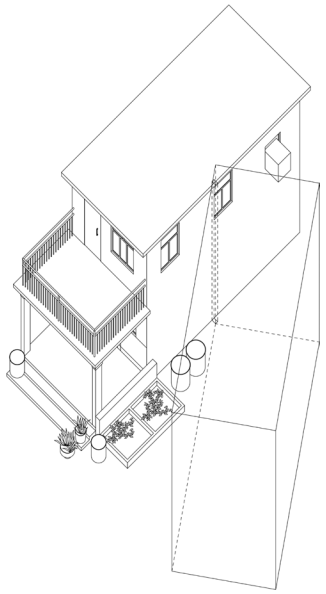
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5-1. A Foothill House
5-2. Axonometric drawing of a Foothill House
6-1. A Streetside House
6-2. Axonometric drawing of a Streetside House

as a messy collection of informal *ad hoc* constructions. To make sense of these seemingly unruly conditions, we started to redraw the houses and dissect their formal structures. We were constantly reminded of the village history of appropriation and the shifting socio-political context, in search of an understanding of the village house types not as predetermined formal structures, but as processes of addition, adaptation, and transformation through time with the landscape. Our research technique could arguably be reversing Steward's "cultural ecology" method—by first looking closely at the cultural phenomenon and the making of houses and homes, we start to dissect their hidden pattern, and eventually, reveal the living they produced.

The Kat O fishing village could be read as a successive transformation of typology along the topography: the foothill, the streetside, and the waterfront. The Foothill Houses were the first-generation houses built in a row during the early 20th century along a stretch of available land by the hillside contour. The archetype of these first-generation Foothill Houses was the "Hakka" village house, with spaces spanning between brick or rammed earth load-bearing walls. Many houses were then rebuilt in the 1950s into two-story concrete structures but still bounded by the original footprint. Utility sheds were then added to the narrow rear space between the house and the hill to store materials for boat repair or house maintenance (Fig. 5).

The Streetside Houses first appeared in 1961 when a row of nine houses were built to accommodate the increasing number of water people moving ashore. More houses were then built along the coastline, forming new settlements in front of the Foothill Houses and a village street in between. Utility sheds for storage or kitchen functions were later added at the rear of the house, and the street became the most populated place in the neighborhood when people are not on the sea. As a reaction, many of the Foothill Houses then added two-story balcony structures at the front of their houses, creating terraces on the upper floor as lookouts for the sea view, as well as covered porch spaces on the ground floor to mediate the sense of privacy of the house (Fig. 6).

The Waterfront Houses were later built to further extend the


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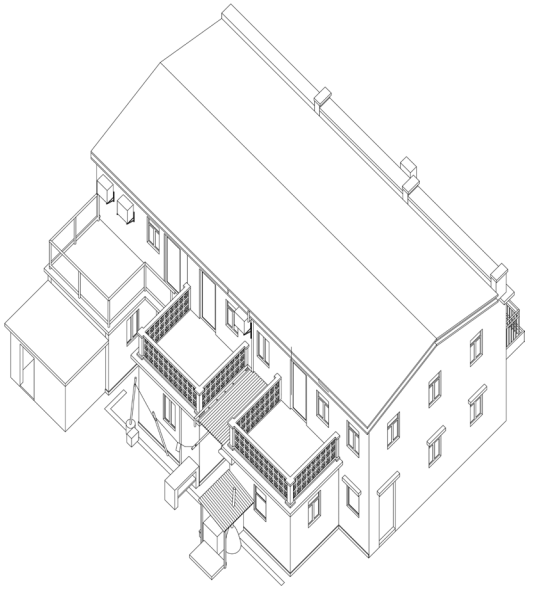
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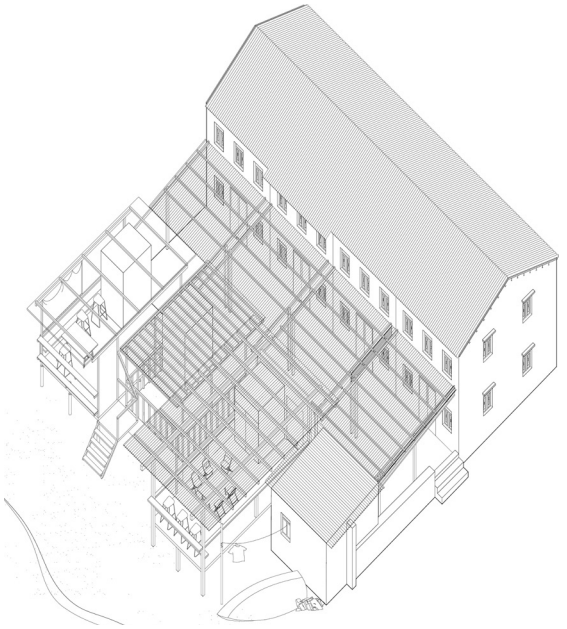

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7-1. A cluster of Waterfront Houses
7-2. Axonometric drawing of a cluster of Waterfront House

village towards the sea. Because of the scarcity of flat land, some parts of the Waterfront House were built on the beach and elevated by stilt structures. Villagers would add metal or polyester canopies at the rear of the Waterfront Houses, and connect them with the Streetside Houses, creating a continuously covered porchway in between. The utility sheds that house the kitchen and storage would be added to the front by the sea. During low tides, the beach would reveal itself and link the "front yards" into a common area of the neighborhood; during high tides, each platform would become its own gathering space raised above the water, laterally connected by timber walkways (Fig. 7).

In this process of drawing, documenting, and categorizing, we noticed that the houses that we have been documenting in Kat O fishing village often acquired a sense of "liquid-ness"—physical yet elusive, without insisting on resolved forms or purist aesthetics, to allow lives to unfold and evolve. We decided to call them "Amphibious Houses" because most of them can (and have to) deal with the environment both on land and in the water. This is perhaps out of necessity: tidal change, incidental runoffs, seasonal rain storms, and typhoons… its surrounding is constantly phase-changing between solid and liquid. The house, therefore, has to transform itself and adapt to a paradoxical entity: providing a stable sense of home while allowing adequate transformation and adaptation to the surrounding geography and weather, metabolizing and exchanging matter and flow with the environment.

These houses, though sharing formal structures and spatial patterns, tend to resist our previous theories on architectural typologies, either modeled as the representation of rationalist philosophy (think Marc-Antoine Laugier's primitive hut), as the response to the questions of mass production (think Le Corbusier's Maison Dom-Ino), or as the revitalization of the forms and fabrics of the traditional city (as projected by Anthony Vidler in his 1977 canonical essay, The Third Typology). Because of the villagers' limited access to education and social participation, building resources, and the process of industrial transformation, the houses they built were directly informed by their relationship with the land and water—they are forever struggling with the land (and the water) in an ongoing ecological dialectic. The landscape gets to change in the unfolding dialectic, but so do the people, and the typological evolution of their houses.

4 How to Build Together, Again?

In our exploration of the Kat O village house types, we intend to not only look at the history but also ask questions about our immediate future, especially the questions of living and building that are once again intrinsically linked together in today's society during and after the pandemic. Quarantine, social distancing, sanitization of urban space, and border control… all these "new normals" have raised new questions about how we should conceive

of our “home” in relation to the constantly changing “landscapes”: environmental, social, and political.

For fishing villages in Hong Kong like Kat O, the need to interrogate the relationship between building and living is even more imminent. By government standards, these houses are called “Squatter Structures,” registered and documented in a territory-wide survey in 1982 by the Housing Department (the 1982 Squatter Survey). These surveyed squatter structures are allowed to remain in existence on a “temporary” basis after 1982, provided that the location, dimensions, building materials, and use of each structure are the same as those recorded in the 1982 Squatter Survey, and until they are cleared for development, safety or environmental reasons, or until they are phased out through natural wastage. In 2018, the Hong Kong government launched a one-off Squatter Occupants Voluntary Registration Scheme (eventually extended to the end of 2022) and asked the residents to report on their houses by categorizing them into two types of structures, each with specified materials: temporary (wood, canvas, aluminum sheet, tin sheet, plastic sheet/plastic corrugated sheet, galvanized iron sheet) and permanent (stone, brick, concrete, reinforced concrete). For the first time, the government has recognized the temporal dimensions of these houses, raising the question of building techniques and durability through its institutional framework of public policies.

The 2018 Scheme is problematic because it is still a testament to the terrestrocentric value system of neoliberal governance and the British colonial legacy of technocratic problem-solving. First is the misplaced motive: the scheme is to provide “revised ex-gratia compensation and rehousing arrangements for domestic households in squatter structures affected by the Government's development clearance exercises,” yet the geographical conditions of these fishing villages do not allow for clearance exercises like those in northern new territories, nor is it viable to carry out massive reclamation schemes. Second is the neglected reality: most boat people spend a considerable amount of time on the water, but these spaces on the water were not accounted for in the 1982 survey. They would not be acknowledged according to the current registration scheme. Last and most importantly is the over-simplified categorization: the easy permanent–temporary divide is based on the habitual understanding of the material as inanimate, raw, brute, dull, and inert. If we take a closer look at the houses in fishing villages, the materials often have their intrinsic agencies—the potential not only to be adapted but also to provoke new use and imagination (Fig. 8).

Our journeys through the fishing villages point to another possible way to understand, analyze, and build, not with solid materials but rather with the sense of temporalities and time,

8. Materials collected from Hong Kong villages: Po Toi O, Tai O, Tai Wai, Pok Fu lam, and Cha Kuo Ling.

highlighting the space between land and water as an agent of transformation and participation.

In other words, we were looking for a more fluid reading of typology. Houses—they not only would like to be close to and with water; they also want to be like water, acquiring its agential capacity to both inform and problematize architecture's relationship with the landscape. Such typological reading could not be created but only observed, and thus requires us to master the techniques of observation and documentation as a renewed method of looking closer at the *ad hoc* and the mundane—a method that is no different from Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour's provocation in *Learning From Las Vegas*:

"Learning from the existing landscape is a way of being revolutionary for an architect. Not the obvious way, which is to tear down Paris and begin again, as Le Corbusier suggested in the 1920s, but another, more tolerant way; that is, to question how we look at things."[7]

The work that we have produced through our visits is not a theoretical provocation, but the constant questioning of how we should look at things: its open-endedness allows anyone to become their own "urban curator," and continue to explore, discover, and add to these fluid reading of the house types (Fig. 9). For architects, landscape architects, and urbanists today, the question raised by Karl August Wittfogel in 1929 might still seem relevant: how does a society's interaction with nature lead to its own restructuring, to each evolution from one form to another? We need to ask ourselves again and again in the world we live in today for our continuing enlightenment, and the earth needs it too for its own survival.

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住宅如水：
对香港吉澳渔村住宅类型的观察与思考

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摘要

《水漾之家：香港渔村故事》是一次结合研究、策展和设计的合作计划。研究聚焦大澳、吉澳和布袋澳三个渔村，通过挖掘蜑家人的文化及其生活和建造的“流动”状态，理解建筑、地理与人文环境的关系，从“水”的视野重新审视香港这座城市。本文关注研究团队近期对吉澳渔村住宅的观察，通过记录居民依地形和水环境对住宅进行加建的现象，探讨一种适应水陆双重环境的“双栖住宅”的可能。

本研究所聚焦的蜑家人聚居的吉澳渔村坐落于山丘和大海之间的一小片平坦陆地上。自1951年以来，吉澳渔村所在的沙头角地区一直受到较为严格的发展限制，建成环境范围较小，大部分区域保留了自然的地理环境。本文重点探讨了吉澳渔村中随处可见的非正式临时建筑，通过重新绘制房屋形态并深入剖析其形式结构，探寻这些看似无序的表象背后的逻辑。通过反思朱利安 · 斯图尔特的“文化生态学”方法，本文试图剖析吉澳渔村住宅背后隐藏的建造模式，最终揭示由此产生的与地理相结合的建造与生活文化。

吉澳渔村经历了由山麓向街道两侧、再向滨水区域发展的过程。研究团队通过图像绘制、记录和分类等工作，呈现了吉澳渔村建筑的一种“流动”状态——虽具有物理实存的特性，却难以捉摸其既有形式或纯粹的美学定式。研究期望通过民族志的视角解读香港城郊海岸住宅及其建筑类型，从时间特性——而非传统的物质材料——来重新思考住宅的物质特性，重新认识建筑与自然之间的辩证关系，从而将水陆之间的空间作为一种激发建筑转型和公众参与的媒介，为利用景观途径进行可持续建筑设计提供新思路。

文章亮点

- 通过民族志文献探寻新的建筑类型
- 探索沿海居民如何在土地稀缺的情况下建造、维护和重建家园
- 提出探究滨海渔村“双栖住宅”特性的新方法
- 从时间范畴重新思考住宅的物质特性

关键词

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