

Pascal Greco

Hong Kong

Perspectives, Prospectives, Typologies

Capturing transformations of Hong Kong

Pascal Greco's Hong Kong series was taken between 2012–17 and captures examples of the city's predominant residential building types since the 1950s.

The series encompasses 135 photos of individual buildings and housing estates photographed on Hong Kong Island, the Kowloon Peninsula and in the New Territories. This series follows Greco's earlier photo collection series of urban landscapes in Seoul, Shanghai and Tokyo.

The most distinctive aspect of the Hong Kong series is the small size of the individual images: 8.5 × 10.6 cm resulting from the use of a Polaroid 600SE camera, with Polaroid type 100 films, both which are not produced anymore. Initially, the selection of this small format seems to contradict the increasingly large size of Hong Kong's housing estates. The use of Polaroid is also the most obvious difference separating Greco's collection from the works of Andreas Gursky, Michael Wolf and others who explored Hong Kong's astonishing building typologies in the 1990–2000s. The second distinctive aspect of the series is the use of the same 127 mm lens for all images. The experimentation with these two self-imposed rules led to unexpected results. To capture the increasing scale of building typologies, Pascal Greco had to make several changes in his position, from street level, to roof terrace to the staircases of public housing estates.

Thus, looking at his photos, we can not only observe three distinct changes in Hong Kong's housing typologies from 5–8 storey *tong lau* buildings in the 1950–60s, to 8–15 storey slab-blocks in the 1960–1970s and 30–40 storey towers in the 1980s–2000s, but we can also reflect on relationships between the changes of the observer's viewpoints and the changes of urban life.

Following Eugène Atget's streetscape photography of the late 19th century, Greco refers to urban life only indirectly, through its traces in the physical environment. In contrast, Peter Cookson Smith captured the urban design of impermanence of Hong Kong (Cookson Smith, 2006¹) by drawing bustling streetscapes, in which human activities seamlessly extend from streets into the neighboring buildings. While such scenes still exist, they have become rare, particularly when one leaves the older urban areas and reaches Hong Kong's New Towns in the New Territories.

In Greco's series, only the photos of the 1950–60s corner houses show street spaces; in all others they are absent. The photos taken from rooftop terraces on Hong Kong Island and Kowloon still give hints to a shared space on these elevated levels, often used by communities of squatters. In the photos of the most recent estates this sense of a commonly shared ground entirely disappears. This is also reflected in the increasing difficulties of

the photographer to reach these spaces, which are mostly closed-off to the public.

With this focus on architectural typologies, Pascal Greco does not claim the role of urban researcher or social activist. However, by following the strict script of his photographic experiment, his images reveal an essential change in the relationship between the captured typologies and Hong Kong's conditions of public space.

The disappearance of Hong Kong's once characteristic street spaces has been the subject of recent studies (UN-Habitat, 2013²; Tieben, 2016³). In *Cities Without Ground: A Hong Kong Guidebook*⁴, Jonathan Solomon and Clara Wong describe how it becomes difficult for people to relate to the experience of a fixed ground in the multileveled spaces of Hong Kong's commercial areas (Solomon [et al.], 2010). Greco mainly captures conditions in other areas of the city: the large housing estates in Kowloon and the New Territories. Here, the relationship to the street as a common ground disappears for another reason: the development of large estates, those which lack traditional street spaces and are divided by wide vehicular roads.

This brings us back to Pascal Greco's use of a Polaroid camera for his series on Hong Kong. While Polaroid has been most popular for sharing personal experience and encounters, it is used here to capture Hong Kong's growing scale of large residential estates. It thus further accentuates the increasing distance between the observer and an accessible, engaging and shared space. While the use of the analogue technique of Polaroid might seem untimely in Hong Kong where most residents spend significant time with sharing digital images, this technique helps to reveal an essential change in the physical space.







