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Curating Community Assets in Hong Kong and Singapore

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Informal Religious Shrines: Curating Community Assets in Hong Kong and Singapore

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Abstract: An interesting feature of the Asian urban landscape is the presence of Chinese religious altars that may be found lying next to a tree, in a discrete section of public space or at a road junction. These altars and statues of deities are usually items left behind by previous owners who have relocated to another area. To the older Chinese generation, "house gods" or religious statues formerly acquired for home collections are not to be discarded disrespectfully. In changing circumstances, when their owners need to leave "family ties" behind, these statues are either given to another "caretaker" or relocated to auspicious places to serve some publicly meaningful function. This practice gives rise to the makeshift or informal shrines in public areas that are not uncommon in highly urbanised and Westernised Asian cities such as Hong Kong and Singapore. Seen from a museological perspective, these are "public collections", driven not by the ideologies of professional curators, but by a sense of cultural religiosity and the social purposes of the populace. This paper aims to re-interpret current curatorial practices by explicating some of the typologies and features of these informal repositories and their custodianship. It also explores the curatorial implications of these community assets in relation to the ageing population and to place-making in the two Asian cities of Hong Kong and Singapore.

Keywords: Ageing, Ecomuseum, Informal Repository, Place-Making, Public Curation

Introduction

A n interesting feature of highly urbanised and Westernised Asian cities such as Hong Kong and Singapore is the occasional Chinese religious shrine lying next to a tree, in a discrete section of a public space or at a certain road junction. These makeshift shrines have two types of origins. Some of them are erected by individuals or groups to express their gratitude for an answered prayer or to ensure a harmonious environment. Others begin when the altars of "house gods" or religious statues are "left behind", because the previous owners have relocated to another home, or because the younger generation no longer observes the same religious practices after the passing of elder family members.[1] To the older Chinese generation, religious statues formerly acquired for home collection and worship are not to be discarded disrespectfully. They are either given to another "caretaker" or are relocated to auspicious places, such as under a tree or beside a roadside rock.

These discarded religious statues in public locations tend to accumulate over time as people deposit their own items. Some elderly residents even scavenge deity-related items from the street and voluntarily take up the mission of relocating them to proper places. Other residents build shelters and structures for these statues and persistently maintain the shrines for years. In time, these shrines take on a number of organisational features and forms. We call them "informal" religious shrines in the sense that there is no formal planning in their genesis or development.

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[1] Nuala Rooney in her book, *At Home with Density*, observes that it is common for Chinese families to have "an easy conscience" about setting up an ancestor tablet or shrine to certain household gods, such as a kitchen/stove god, sky god, or altar to Kwan-yin or Tu-ti, in their homes. However, she also discovers that although every household displays some sort of references to the folk religion, this does not necessarily reflect a strong personal religious belief, except for the older members in the family. Instead, these images appear to be a means for residents to express their Chinese identity within the home basing upon the strength of their personal folk-models, or to fulfill a taken-for-granted expectation of how a Chinese home should look. The practice may change as the iconic value of the object assumes a new interpretation as it is consumed and re-contextualised by the younger members of the family (2005, 118-131).

COMMON GROUND

According to our research,[2] the statues placed in such shrines are not predetermined; their contents depend on what someone happens to discard or find. Although the shrines follow a religious theme, the deities gathered there are very mixed. There are statues related to diverse Chinese vernacular beliefs, including images of the Buddha, Gwan Dai, Guan Yin, figures of Confucian legend or of classical literature such as the Monkey God, or indigenous spirits such as Tou Deih Gung and Wong Tai Sin. In one of these shrines in the northern part of Singapore, the collection includes religious figurines from various other faiths.

Our study suggests that the typology of informal religious shrines can be broadly categorised into the following kinds: street corner shrines, street-side shrines, tree shrines, hillside shrines, garden shrines and void deck shrines. These shrines occupy the margins of the urban fabric, but serve unintended social and religious functions, primarily for the community elders. For example, when some discarded deities are found in an open space, an elder person will build a shelter to protect them from rain and wind. In addition, an urn may be placed there for incense offerings, followed by additional ritualistic items such as candle holders, bins for burning paper offerings or vases with flowers. As the collection of ad hoc items slowly takes on its shrine-character, other people are also encouraged to worship and contribute to the collective rituals there. The aforementioned classifications of shrines are not static, but can evolve into other types of shrines with time. Some can even grow into quasi-commercial ritual sites where the self-proclaimed custodians may receive "incense donations", and hence, proceeds from the worshippers. The street corner shrine at the famous Temple Street tourist area in Hong Kong (Fig.1) is now attended daily by a caretaker who not only maintains the shrine, but also serves as a fortune teller to earn a living. The Forest of 10,000 Deities in Singapore began as a humble tree shrine, due to the presence of a large banyan tree. Over time, local residents expanded the shrine's boundary by building additional spaces for housing the deities and for socialising. A large, yellow canvas canopy is stretched over the shrine to provide shade and announce its symbolic presence. During religious festivals, the physical boundary is further expanded temporarily by appropriating a side street for staging performances and for community dining. (Fig.2) The Forest of 10,000 Deities is classified as a tree shrine, but during a religious festival it can take on the characteristics of a street-side shrine.

Figure 1: A street corner shrine is transformed into a quasi-commercial ritual site
Sources: Kong, 2010 (left); Siu, 2013 (right)

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[2] Both authors have been researching informal religious shrines for the past ten years in Hong Kong and Singapore. For field work on this paper, visits were undertaken to various shrines and interviews conducted with users and caretakers between mid-2012 and mid-2013.

Figure 2: A tree shrine, The Forest of 10,000 Deities (left) is temporarily expanded for staging
performances and community dining during festivals (right)
Source: Kong, 2012

Ageing Population

A common characteristic of the informal religious shrines across Hong Kong and Singapore is
the role of the elderly in their care and maintenance. The shrines are interwoven into these
people's daily lives and serve as important social anchors in the urban fabric of the city. Both
Hong Kong and Singapore are facing the growth of an ageing population with a declining birth
rate. According to the Central Intelligence Agency (2013), the life expectancies of Singaporeans
and Hong Kongers are among the highest in the world. In Singapore, it is projected that the
number of elderly people will increase to 900,000 by 2030, and in Hong Kong the figure will
grow close to 1.8 million by 2029.[3] In light of this impending crisis, the Singaporean government
has embarked on an aggressive policy to attract new immigrants, encourage active lifestyles for
the ageing population, and provide more facilities to take care of older people's social and
medical needs. Taking a less aggressive approach, Hong Kong has established the Elderly
Commission (since 1997). This commission advises the government on four strategic directions,
namely to promote personal responsibility, strengthen community action, create supportive
environments and improve the image of ageing. Taking a rather "hands-off" approach, the Hong
Kong government is keen on mobilising NGOs, district bodies, the business sector, health
professionals, academics, the mass media and volunteers to take the lead in forming a social
trend for adopting healthy lifestyles. Beyond these various ongoing initiatives in Hong Kong and
Singapore, we argue that the relationship between the informal religious shrines and the elderly
can offer a unique and practical model for connecting active lifestyles, place-making and
spiritual anchoring in urban settings.

The Genesis and Development of Three Informal Shrines

Mieke Bal believes that "collecting comes to mean collecting precisely when a series of
haphazard purchases or gifts suddenly becomes a meaningful sequence. That is the moment
when a self-conscious narrator begins to 'tell' its story, bringing about semiotics for a narrative
of identity, history, and situation". Bal also thinks that "the beginning of a collection is a

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[3] Projections on the elderly populations in these cities can be found in the National Population and Talent Division, Prime
Minister's office, 2012-2013, *Our Demographics Challenges and What These Means to Us* (for Singapore); and the
Elderly Commission's *Healthy Ageing Report, 2000*, by the Hong Kong government.

meaning, not [just] an act" (1994, 101). The meaning that elderly people attribute to "rescued deities" may not only be ascribed to their personal religious beliefs, but also to their desire and good will for others to pay respect and to establish a harmonious relationship with the spirits. We believe that a new meaning is signified the moment someone places a found statue under a shelter or adds a cover to it. This left-behind item is transformed into a respected object through their act. The item thereby starts to acquire its shrine-character and meaning as it becomes an informal repository with further collective actions. This is evident in the cases mentioned above and the others that follow.

Hillside Shrine

The hillside shrine in Hong Kong near Kowloon's So Uk Estate can serve as an example. This shrine was started by a woman named Leung Kwai after her retirement.[4] She had the habit of scavenging discarded deity altars and figurines from the streets of her Sham Shui Po neighbourhood, a relatively old district in northwestern Kowloon. She found an auspicious spot under a large Indian rubber bush on the hillside next to the So Uk bus terminal, and brought the artefacts there. The deity items accumulated, and it was not long before another senior citizen volunteered to build a structure to shelter all the deities. Over the course of 16 years, the collection grew and a few similar structures were built at various hillside locations nearby. The shrines were attended to by Leung Kwai and her partner (whose name she doesn't know, despite a long-term collaboration on the shrine). Other custodians included the bus drivers and senior residents who came daily to exercise and have their morning stroll. The other senior residents brought ritual items regularly to decorate the shrines and others made incense and oil donations. All of these people believe that the deities have to be respected and secured in proper places for the good of the people and the spiritual realms. Although some people may have a desire for "reciprocal enrichment" (Scott, 1997, 224) and hope that great giving to the spiritual realms will result in great receiving of some unspoken benefits in return, most of the worshippers come with the simple intention of paying their respects and offerings to the wide variety of gods there, as part of a daily ritual.

Figure 3: One of the So Uk hillside shrines (left) has begun to look dilapidated (right) due to a dismantlement after the key caretaker has moved away from the neighbourhood
Sources: Chau, 2007 (left); Siu, 2013 (right)

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[4] Thanks to Ms. Chau Yee Mei, who informed the authors of this particular case in 2009. Part of the story is documented in her book, *Our Home, Sham Shui Po* (2011), Hong Kong: MCCM Creations and Community Museum Project.

Being quite visible and yet seemingly unobtrusive, the So Uk Estate hillside shrines have managed to survive for many years despite governmental regulations. Only when the Lands Department received complaints, for example, from the nearby school concerning the smoke from burning offerings, did officials come to dismantle a shrine. Such dismantlements have happened a couple times according to one of our informants. However, the shrines always slowly resumed in the course of time, as Ms. Leung and other seniors continued to bring their found deity items and routinely pay tributes to the collection of deities. Recently however, the shrines have begun to look dilapidated, as Ms. Leung has moved away (since 2009) from the neighbourhood and no longer comes back regularly to care for the site. (Fig.3)

One other factor that may contribute to the disappearance of a shrine, according to our source, is disputes caused by the issue of donations. This kind of dispute happened over a shrine at the other end of the So Uk bus terminal. Reportedly, someone took advantage of this shrine and collected its donation money for personal benefit. As a result, other worshippers began to boycott the shrine out of a sense of spiritual integrity, and let it slowly fall into disrepair. In other words, there is an implicit monitoring system behind even with such informal custodianship, which develops out of a sense of personal religiosity and belief in the common good. One often finds written warnings at the shrines: "Curse you a lifetime if [the offerings are] taken away." In such cases, the implicit relations (and struggles) among the caretakers and worshippers are made explicit and maintained. The legitimacy and meaning of the informal shrines are meant for the larger community and not for selfish gain. Such behaviour by the caretakers is not unlike that of curators for a public collection of artefacts, who strive to justify their existence by upholding their civic role.

Fortunately, the government of Hong Kong seems to have taken a rather passive attitude towards these illegal structures around the city, so long as they are regulated peacefully by members of the community at large and do not present an obstacle to any planned development. These informal religious shrines may serve precisely the aforementioned community roles advocated by the Elderly Commission, as they provide good justifications for "promoting personal responsibility" and "strengthening community action". The shrines are, after all, "supportive environments" developed from the bottom-up by the population of elders. This is perhaps why the authorities have, so far, shown unexpected tolerance for the public but illegal existence of local shrines.

Void Deck Shrine

The void deck is a common feature in public housing developments in Singapore. A void deck is a continuous space on the ground floor of a housing block that allows residents to walk through the building. Other than structural columns, rubbish chutes, elevators, seats, stairs, mailboxes and rooms dedicated to building services, the typical void deck has, over the years, been fitted with small sundry shops, daycare centres and medical clinics. Facilities for the elderly, such as senior citizens' corners and rehabilitation centres have also been gradually introduced due to an ageing population living in the housing estates. Given that the void deck is not designed with any specific use in mind, it can accommodate a diverse range of activities. Malay weddings on weekends or funeral services are common occurrences there.

A typical example of a void deck shrine is found in the western part of Singapore, located beneath a block of flats on Clementi West Street 1. Many of the elderly people who frequent the senior citizens' corner come from the flats above, or live nearby. The shrine began when residents who were moving out of their flats brought their porcelain religious statues to the deck's corner. The collection gradually grew in size and took on a more formal presence with the introduction of an altar table and other religious paraphernalia. (Fig.4) Residents also donated furniture to complement the fixed seats provided by the Housing Development Board. The deposit of porcelain statues is not unidirectional. Residents can also come and pick up a "left-

behind" statue if they wish. The elderly caretaker we interviewed mentioned that there used to be more statues in the past. The number has been reduced through the years as the residents adopted them. In addition to those on the altar table, the remaining porcelain statues are strategically placed at the corners of the senior citizens' space. The elderly caretaker also uses the corner to store materials and objects that have been donated or found. When we spoke to him, he was busy dismantling a wooden IKEA shoe rack. He hoped to recycle the wood for other purposes. As part of his daily morning ritual, this elderly caretaker boils a kettle of water to make tea and proceeds to tidy up the place. The corner is also fitted with a small kitchen and a toilet.

Figure 4: An altar table at the void deck (left) slowly expands into a senior citizens' storage and activity space (right)
Source: Kong, 2013

Residents walking past the informal shrine to the bus stop in the morning greet the caretaker, and he sometimes stops to talk to the passers-by. As the day proceeds, more elderly people drop by the corner. They talk, read the newspaper or just sit quietly by themselves. The informal religious shrine in the senior citizens' corner is connected to a larger network of formal and informal shrines in the city. The residents often receive invitations to participate in religious events organised by other shrine caretakers. Unlike a formal temple, the shrine functions amongst other social activities housed in the senior citizens' corner. In fact, the corner saw a temporarily drop in use when the police came and asked them to stop using the space to play card games. A few of the elderly members sought help from a member of Parliament, and they were advised to use bottle caps or peanuts as substitutes for money. Despite this change, an elderly neighbour informed us that the police still forbid them to continue their card-playing activity.

Wah Fu Garden Shrine

The shore of Kellett Bay at Aberdeen, on the southwestern coast of Hong Kong Island, holds the city's earliest public housing project, the Wah Fu Estate.[5] The rocky seaside next to the estate cluster is now fenced and has been transformed by the Leisure and Culture Services Department into the Waterfall Bay Park. The park has ample leisure amenities, including play and exercise

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[5] Wah Fu Estate is one of the early public housing estates built between 1967 and 1978 on the southwestern coast of Hong Kong Island in Aberdeen. Originally comprising 18 residential blocks, the development now forms a residential cluster with Wah Kwai Estate (6 blocks, since 1990) and Ka Lung Court (4 blocks, since 1991), totalling 9,964 households. One can imagine that for a public housing estate like Wah Fu which has a 40-year history, there is a high percentage of senior citizens living there, and that there have been many generations of family relocations. As families or family members move away, items deemed unsuited to their new (modern) homes such as religious figurines are left behind or discarded.

equipment for children and the elderly, a shaded promenade, toilets and even barbeque pits. More remarkable, however, is the eastern end beyond the official park area, where a self-organised community of elderly and other local residents have appropriated a stretch of the seaside for various recreational and informal religious activities. Extending a hundred metres along the shore, this area has been made into a somewhat scenic "deity place" alternative to the Waterfall Bay Park. (Fig.5)

Figure 5: The Wah Fu garden shrine with thousands of deity statues secured to the stepped slope
Source: Siu, 2013

Perhaps for fengshui reasons, the deity place has become a destination for residents from the nearby estates who wish to leave their porcelain deities or home altars when they relocate to new homes. One of the most significant features of the area is the thousands of deity statues placed by the shore. For the past 30 years, residents have been bringing in all kinds of religious figurines and progressively redesigning the landscape there. The shoreline has accumulated close to 10,000 deity artefacts of various types or forms, and each is secured or cemented to the stepped slope that has been shaped by the local residents. Some statues are even protected within specially built cases and miniature shelters. (Fig.6) Like in an open-air repository, the growing collection of statues spans many histories and varieties of tradition. The statues are kept and cared for by an informal team of volunteers. Some caretakers come by almost every day to maintain the sloped landscape, the plants and self-built facilities. One caretaker claims that he comes twice a day to burn incense for the deities at various spots around the site. Given the site's garden-like nature – with an idyllic sea view, breeze, sunshine, trees, flowers and even colonies of bees, we call it a garden shrine. This shrine, with its colourful collection of porcelain gods, legendary icons and (non-religious or cartoon) figurines such as Lu Xun or Hello Kitty, has evidently been curated and decorated over the years primarily by the senior residents from the neighbourhood. Other residents also come to worship and to assist in decorating the shrine area as a pastime. Quite unexpectedly, there is even a tree hung with a collection of stuffed toys, ranging from telebubbies to fluffy teddy bears. (Fig.7)

Some of the area residents have organised themselves as the Wah Fu Swimmers Club (name inscribed onto a rock, dated 1985) and they regularly come down to have a dip either early in the morning or in the afternoon. The other garden shrine visitors are mainly retired citizens who drop by to socialise or play cards as a pastime. They are joined by minibus and taxi drivers who come for a respite before their next shift. These people gather at the shore not only to conduct leisurely activities at regular times, but also to maintain and build necessary facilities that help sustain the recreational and religious purposes of the garden shrine. They have a sense of belonging to the site. According to the senior residents we interviewed, the shrine started many years ago when people began to deposit their house gods around the area's big boulder. This place slowly became a repository of "left behind" deities as more and more families moved away from the surrounding estates. One informant explained that some people even brought statues from homes far away, as they found this a better place to keep their home collection than at their newly acquired modern apartments.

Figure 6: Statues protected within specially built cases and miniature shelters (left)
Source: Siu, 2013

Figure 7: A tree hung with a collection of stuffed toys (right)
Source: Siu, 2013

Over time, people brought in more and more religious artefacts, offerings, flowers, incense and construction materials. In visiting the site, one witnesses not only a rich array of colourful figurines, but also signs of scattered diggings, plantings and construction efforts across the sloped and rocky shore. For many years, the residents have paved concrete paths and sheltered the original boulder to make a more formal shrine, and enclosed its surroundings into a "clubhouse", with walls of sheet-metal, discarded boards and banners, where the men now gather to play cards and mahjong (and to offer incense or send prayers). This "central piece" is now fashioned into a dwelling for the deity statues and altars and a facility for community gatherings with tables and chairs. (Fig.8) Around this structure, people have also built a changing room for the swimmers, and even dug a well to collect fresh water for after-swim rinsing. Across the entire shore, stretching for more than a hundred metres, the residents not only arrange the porcelain deities and decorate altars, but also build seating areas and step slopes, grow plants, construct pavements, sweep leaves, build burning pits and make regular offerings.

This ever growing shrine and its surrounding area have now become a rather active community space where citizens (especially senior citizens) from the surrounding estates would drop by to enjoy the idyllic atmosphere, the scenery and sea breeze, and to pay tributes to the gods. Since last year, the community has solicited a considerable sum of donations to build a life-

sized Tin Hau (Heavenly Empress) altar at the outer shore, with a proper drainage system to cope with the rise and fall of the tides. (Fig.9) The "architect" for this altar is a resident volunteer who used to be a construction worker; now a night-shift taxi driver, he is able to spend his afternoon hours and dedicates his skills to serve, as he describes it, "the people". He is not looking for any returns, but simply wants to contribute to the common good, and he even pays for some of the expenses. He and other supporting volunteers brought in cement, rocks, colourful tiles and other necessary scavenged materials. They have worked for months on the construction, only to find that a district councillor complained of its illegality. A petition was thus taken to the Lands Department with the help of another councillor from an opposing party, urging that the structure be kept for the good of the community. The case is now under review by the authorities, who will presumably deliberate on the safety and the (political or social) legitimacy of the structure.

Figure 8: The "clubhouse" (left) at the Wah Fu garden shrine with a changing room at the side (right)
Source: Siu, 2013

Illegal Place-Making and Ecomuseology

Place-making in a globalised world of capital mobility and consumption is a major contemporary challenge, especially in the case of informal religious shrines with their occupations of society's margins.[6] In many instances, the appropriations of public spaces for informal shrines are in conflict with the law, as with the So Uk and Wah Fu shrines in Hong Kong. These informal religious shrines occupy urban spaces that are often negotiated, contested and self-regulated, if not directly regulated by the authorities. Even the void deck shrines in the designated senior citizens' corner on the ground floor of a public housing apartment in Singapore can challenge the prescribed regulatory order, as shown by the police concern to supervise activities there. Unlike the officially sanctioned initiatives of place-making, which are usually confined to a narrow band of conserved buildings and spaces dedicated to cultural, commercial and retail activities, the

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[6] As cities become more global and competitive, attracting people with money to invest or spend becomes a major consideration for city officials when it comes to the types of urban projects to be developed. One consequence is the displacement of long-time residents who have put down roots in the city but are moved through forced relocation or high rents. For more detailed analysis and case studies on the effect of consumption-oriented behaviour on urban environments, the book *Consuming Cities*, by Malcolm and Steven Miles, is a good starting point. Sharon Zukin's book *Naked Cities: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Spaces* provides an insightful account on how the influx of a new class of hip, mobile urban residents who exemplify the "cappuccino culture" has slowly replaced the diverse and localised neighbourhood identities of New York City. *Cities for People, Not for Profit: Critical Theory and the Right to the City*, edited by Neil Brenner, Peter Marcuse and Margit Mayer, is a collection of essays that argues for a re-focus on social needs in city planning and construction. This book situates the discourse on city spaces and offers alternatives to the current model of capital-driven urbanisation against the background of the recent global financial crisis.

illegal place-making efforts of the informal shrine makers eschew such commercialising tendencies. The informal shrines are constantly adapting, and their caretakers are continuously negotiating with the authorities to maintain their quiet existence. In more desperate circumstances, the caretakers may appeal to the public for help to resist interference from the authorities, as in the case of the Wah Fu garden shrine in Hong Kong. Similarly, the caretakers of an illegal road side multi-religious shrine in Singapore have extended a formal invitation to their member of Parliament to partake in religious festivities to give their shrine legitimacy. Despite their continuing struggles and illegal natures, the informal shrines are a powerful testament to an authentic, bottom-up construction of place in the city. Referring to the American context, Dolores Hayden writes

> The power of place - the power of ordinary urban landscapes to nurture citizens' public memory, to encompass shared time in the form of shared territory - remains untapped for most working people's neighborhoods in most American cities, and for most ethnic history and most women's history. (1995, 9)

The informal religious shrines of Hong Kong or Singapore resonate deeply with Hayden's description of what place-making can do. The shrines expand Hayden's notion of urban landscape as public history to include spaces for the elderly in the city. These informal religious shrines, although indigenous and ad hoc in nature, nevertheless constitute the very individuality and uniqueness of places to which individuals and communities attach deep significance. These places can be described as what Peter Davis identifies as "cultural touchstones" under the ecomuseum[7] concept, in which local communities are encouraged and empowered to identify and take control of their own (moveable or immovable, tangible or intangible) heritage resources as they relate to the network of interactions between people and their particular physical, economic, social, cultural and political environments (Davis 2005, 365). Moreover, Varine's proposition (1988) of the four key objectives of ecomuseums, namely to serve as a community database, as an observatory of change, as a focal point and as a showcase for the community, echoes the place-making potential of the informal religious shrines.

Seen from an ecomuseum perspective, these indigenously derived examples may serve as forceful references for Asian museum professionals to rethink practices that are, as Harrison (2005, 43) puts it, driven by the local community, its social subjects and their concerns, rather than practices that are focused on objects only. The community needs should drive the museological development, and the museum is not necessarily confined to a building (Stevenson 1987, 31, quoted in Harrison). By applying the concept of the "fragmented museum", which encourages the visitor to explore the local area by visiting several "cultural touchstones" (Davis 2005, 369), the various informal religious shrines in a city can even be curated and seen together as a form of experimental museum.

Public Curation

Derived from the Latin word *curatus*, to curate means to care for. Although curators in modern-day art and museum practice have taken on a more complex professional role, the origin of the word, "to care", still bears an enduring meaning and purpose when framed against the backdrop

[7] Ecomuseums originated in France along with the growth of interest in the environment and the emergence of environmentalism as a phenomenon in the 1960s. Since then, ecomuseums have gone beyond the naturalistic, ecological, geographical and biological definitions of the term "environment", and have become one of the operative concepts or ways of thinking in the practice of "new museologies" (Harrison 2005, 43). As Davis puts it, "The ecomuseum mission is to conserve the very special natures of places – a territory, with its landscapes, wildlife, historic artefacts, peoples, customs and folklore that is managed by local people – with emphasis on special 'touchstones' that are valued and exhibited to local people and visitors" (2005, 369). Also see Rivière (1985) for background.

of the informal religious shrines and their elderly caretakers. In this paper, we have expanded the notion of curatorial practice beyond the traditional perspective to include informal public collections of religious statues and their accompanying paraphernalia, which are cared for primarily by a particular segment of society – the elderly. This expansion therefore opens up several provocative questions and issues for deliberation.

1. Who is a Curator?

A curator, as conventionally defined, is someone who selects, interprets, organises and presents a set of artefacts for an audience, based on a particular thematic focus within an institutional setting. Although contemporary curatorial practice has evolved into diverse platforms, a curator is still perceived to be an individual who is equipped with the knowledge base to make curatorial judgments and decisions. It is often overlooked that the process of curation can also be a participatory and distributed activity that includes multiple intentions and actors.

In the case of the informal religious shrines, the elderly residents may not have a "professional" museum background. However, this absence of credentials does not make them any less caring or curatorial with regard to the shrine-collections and the found resources they choose to handle. In fact, with their limited resources, the curators of informal religious shrines have a need to be more creative, opportunistic and collaborative when it comes to the curation of their spaces. They are simultaneously curating a functional and a symbolic space, not only for themselves, but also for the neighbourhood. It is akin to what Nina Simon believes to be "the participatory museum" which is potentially open to all – a place where visitors can create, share and connect with each other around content (Simon 2010, ii). An additional advantage of these informal spaces is that they require no admission fees and are open at all hours.

Figure 9: Residents constructing the Tin Hau altar at the shore of Wah Fu garden shrine
Source: Siu, 2012

Elderly residents living above the void deck shrine in Singapore come every day to the senior residents' corner where the shrine is located. They keep the place clean and tidy up the altar table. They collect discarded objects and materials with the intention of transforming them into practical objects such as shelves or trays for the shrine. For the Wah Fu garden shrine, many people from the neighbourhood come voluntarily to perform different activities. Intrepid swimmers scavenge the right-sized rocks from the seabed as necessary building blocks for landscaping. Others bring left-over materials and cement from nearby construction sites and some neighbours take charge of the basic construction of site facilities. As a group, everyone contributes in the daily maintenance and cleaning of the shrine, bringing flowers or fruits, making worship offerings or donating money for necessary (developmental) expenses. In

attempting to build the new Tin Hau altar last year, each of the key members reportedly donated a few hundred HK dollars. The Tin Hau statue inside this new altar was not a "rescued" item. This statue was specially commissioned from a craft shop in mainland China and cost around HK$3000. The rest of the building materials, such as the cement and tiles, were either bought or scavenged from nearby dumpsites by an ad hoc group of "community members". Although there seems to be little formal organisation, the curators are able to meet the implicit needs by coordinating necessary efforts and social resources.

2. What are Community Assets and Can They be Curated?

In this paper, we consider community assets in both tangible and intangible forms. The assets of a community can be its people and spaces, or they can be physical artefacts in the community that possess monetary, social or cultural values. As artefacts, the tangible assets of the informal religious shrines do not possess the economic value associated with, say, equipment in a factory or cultural artefacts in a museum. In fact, they are the opposite – discarded porcelain statues, donated or scavenged furniture from residents living near-by, recycled materials and objects, etc. These objects and materials are considered by their owners as having outlasted their purposes. However, the elder residents, with their care, creativity, resourcefulness, untiring energy and ample time, have repaired and curated the flotsam of objects and materials into a public collection that supports the continuing function, worship and use of the shrines. They believe this kind of place creation will continue. As one participant at the Wah Fu shrine told us, even though a leading member may be unable to come any longer for daily offerings due to ill-health, another will definitely come to fill the role. This participant at Wah Fu believes that the growing collection of religious artefacts at the shrine is so unique that the government will eventually see its value as a religious park, if not an archaeological site. We argue, however, that these community "assets" cannot be easily objectified like the collections in a museum. These items are in-determined, inconsistent and ad hoc. They do not easily fall into any categories of knowledge under the contemporary curatorial mindset. The assets are thematic – i.e., seemingly about religion – but by no means specifically religious, and they are open to expression of certain popular tastes, as seen in the inclusion of kitschy or cartoon toys within their collection ambit. To the elderly curators, these places may not be seen as "shrines" as we normally see them, but as multi-purpose activity places for the community. This is why these collections and spaces defy objectification. The "shrines" are active but contingent objects within an environment that invites interactions, particularly among the elders who agree to a certain belief system or have the spare time and energy to engage in related communal underpinnings. The real community assets here are the people, operating within a suitably nurtured platform for performing their well-intended acts.

3. Curation as an Ad Hoc, Open, Participatory Everyday Practice

Whether a curated exhibition takes place within or outside of the museum, it has a definite duration for both the presentation of the work and the audience viewing it. The curatorial control of the exhibition also points towards the editorial hand of the curator. Unlike the single authorship of a curator within a museum setting, the elderly shrine caretakers work together in an ad hoc manner, volunteering and self-initiating as needed. Their informal religious shrines are ongoing projects that flow along with the rhythm of everyday life. On a particular day, someone can come and leave a porcelain statue; a make-do shelter may require simple maintenance, or donated furniture may need repair. The daily practice of caring and maintaining the shrines, together with other related activities, does not fall neatly within the duration of an exhibition opening or closing. It is more open-ended and participatory. Contrary to the curated artefacts in a museum that are often presented as a didactic museum experience for the visitors, the artefacts in an informal religious shrine cannot be reduced to mere representation. In fact, the curatorial

effort of shrine caretakers has extended its remit into the curation of "third places" which exist, as Oldenburg puts it, "on neutral ground and serve to level their guests to a condition of social equality" (1999, 42). In other words, these places are utterly open, receptive and adaptive to everyone's contributions and interactions. The seashore has been transformed into a garden shrine, and the void deck has become a void deck shrine. These informal shrines are "great good places", that are not only "marked by a playful mood", but also "offer psychological comfort and support to a vital informal public life" (ibid.), in this case for the elderly.

4. Curated Space in an Ageing Society

In Singapore, the highly determined and regulated nature of urban spaces often dictates how the spaces can be used. It is not uncommon to find signage on the walls of the void decks that declares which activities are forbidden. The self-regulatory, contingent and improvisational nature of a space curated by the elderly can offer a more inclusive, adaptive and participatory alternative to the regulated and controlled urban space. Although the void deck shrine in Singapore is housed within the official senior citizens' corner, the inclusion of the shrine was not part of the original intent. The elderly are therefore ever-careful in how they adapt and negotiate with existing rules and regulations, as they curate the space for social and religious activities. In Hong Kong, the shrine-makers enjoy more of a laissez-faire attitude, not only from the authorities but also from the stakeholders. As long as disputes are handled internally and without explicit outbreaks, things can seemingly survive or die away in their natural courses. In maintaining spaces such as the various shrines described above, it is crucial to avoid complaints. The collective curatorial effort is to absorb the complaints or to divert adversities towards communal religiosity. The quiet and subtle tactics of the elderly for sustaining the life of the shrines can perhaps be attributed to their "living wisdom", cultivated through years of lived experience. In such cases, inclusivity is maintained within a publicly owned space.

Curating Dignity

In the 74th plenary meeting of the United Nations General Assembly (1991), a paper titled "The Implementation of the International Plan of Action on Aging and Related Activities" identified five key principles for governments to include in their programmes for the elderly. These principles are independence, participation, care, self-fulfilment and dignity. Unlike people living in an elders' home with assigned rules that strictly regulate activities and behaviour, the elderly in the informal shrines are free to live their lives the way they wish while belonging to a larger social group. They have control over their immediate space, and they all explicitly or implicitly agree on simple rules to enable the shrines to function. They participate willingly in group activities, or have the opportunity to carry out their own individual tasks. For example, one of the caretakers of the Wah Fu garden shrine has on his own accord taken on the role of beekeeper. Although he is not the originator of this activity, he feels it would be a pity if the previous efforts by another caretaker were left to waste. The self-initiated caring for the shrines, from the simple daily acts of keeping the grounds clean to the more labour intensive activities of landscaping or beekeeping, for example, provide a sense of fulfilment for the elderly, as they are contributing to a larger community. They see a communal purpose in their actions and they indirectly help to sustain a feeling of self-worth among all members of the community.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the discarded materials, furniture, religious porcelain deities and the elderly caretakers of the informal shrines that thrive along the margins of the urban fabric share similar qualities. In a sense, the elderly residents have lost their "value" in society by being economically unproductive. In a fast-paced and globalised society connected to the flow of international trade

and finance where speed, efficiency and productivity are highly prized, and of which Hong Kong and Singapore are exemplars, the elderly can be perceived as societal burdens. So too are the porcelain deities of informal shrines, which are generally cast-off, "unwanted" objects. However, out of a sense of respect or the fear of future reprisals, these "unwanted" porcelain deities are given a useful place of honour in the informal religious shrines. The discarded materials and furniture are re-purposed and given a second life by the "unproductive" elderly. French philosopher Merleau-Ponty (1964, 162) in "Eye and Mind" wrote, "Things are an annex or prolongation of itself; they are encrusted into its flesh, they are part of its full definition; the world is made of the same stuff as the body." Merleau-Ponty's argument is that objects are not innate entities, but are intertwined with our bodies, and we experience the world through them. Unlike the passivity of living in a retirement home, the daily care of discarded porcelain deities and informal shrines is an active, visceral engagement in the world by the elderly caretakers. Similarly, their occupations of marginal spaces that are considered banal help to regenerate authentic lives in these city spaces – in an era that celebrates superficial place-making efforts centred primarily on consumption. To follow Harrison's argument on the development of the "other" museologies, the dynamic existence of informal religious shrines should prompt museum professionals to ask whether they can shift from the centre to the periphery, and play the kind of roles that "bring out the hybrid and dynamic nature of the fractured realities" (Karp 1992, 25) from these margins (Harrison 2005, 47). The ongoing collection, dialogue, negotiation and curation of the different groups of "refuge" in public places, so to speak, presents a fascinating analogy for museum inclusivity – not to mention an insight into the world of the elderly and their roles in an alternative form of place-making in Hong Kong and Singapore.

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The International Journal of the Inclusive Museum addresses a key issue: In this time of fundamental social change, what is the role of the museum, both as a creature of that change, and perhaps also as an agent of change? The journal brings together academics, curators, museum and public administrators, cultural policy makers, and research students to engage in discussions about the historic character and future shape of the museum. The fundamental question of the journal is: How can the institution of the museum become more inclusive?

In addition to traditional scholarly papers, this journal invites case studies that take the form of presentations of museum practice—including documentation of organizational curatorial and community outreach practices and exegeses analyzing the effects of those practices.

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