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People Make Places: Rediscovering Hong Kong's Cultural Heritage through Placemaking

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ABSTRACT

Hong Kong's rich cultural tapestry is embedded in its history, architecture and communities, connected by a genius loci rooted in its people. This paper demonstrated how One Bite Design Studio leveraged tangible, intangible, and everyday heritage as placemaking tools to build urban and rural communities via three local case studies. "Trolley Central" not only foregrounded the importance of overlooked, humble trolleys found in Hong Kong, but connected visitors with memories of the past. The heartfelt stories from trolley operators and makers fostered a holistic appreciation of everyday intangible culture in the urban streetscapes, using the humble trolley as a vessel to collect and share stories for the present and future generations. "Project House @1QRW", convened in a well-preserved 1920s historical *tonglau* shophouse, was envisioned as a community living room that merged the past and present. The beautiful architecture triggered the fond memories of longtime residents and attracted them to participate in activities planned to bring residents and visitors together, reaffirming one's sense of place and creating new identities and shared memories. Traditionally, Hong Kong's story has centred on urban development and overshadowed the vibrant economic and cultural life of rural villages. As the curatorial partner for the "Sai Kung Hoi Arts Festival," we spotlighted these underrepresented narratives by bringing artists and community stakeholders together in co-created art installations and public experiences. Our collective efforts transformed local villagers' roles into active partners, and demonstrated how their rural culture and heritage could lead to a plausible pathway for rural revitalisation. These projects from Hong Kong not only shed light on the important role of culture and heritage in placemaking, but reflect the significance of community engagement in the process to building identity, sense of place and belonging, all foundational for developing resilient communities in urban and rural realms.

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1. Introduction

Placemaking has come under the spotlight in the urban realm since the post-war days of awakening against large-scale development and the fight for a human-scale approach in urban planning, as advocated by Jacobs' emphasis on sidewalks and parks and Whyte's on "small urban spaces", among many [1,2]. The underlying principles and vision of placemaking have taken shape, and slowly become an essential tool in activating and improving public spaces, building communities' identity and boosting their participation [3]. The role of public space was further evidenced during COVID-19, serving as a lifeline for people's holistic well-being [4,5], but also equally important post-pandemic when the priority turned to rebuilding street life, communities and interpersonal connections [6,7]. On an international and policy level, placemaking and public space have gained some of the first mentioning in international goals, such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 11.7: "By 2030, provide universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces, in particular for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities. Public space is publicly owned land and available for public use.", plus its linkage with the New Urban Agenda [8].

Meanwhile, there has been an increasing discussion regarding the importance of heritage and culture in placemaking. García-Esparza *et al.* found out that the introduction of participatory process and arts intervention could create new meanings for place whilst reconstructing the past [9]. Jeleński posited how the consideration of heritage and local history is essential so as not to create places that are planned in a top-down manner and neglect existing urban and social fabric [10]. Rather, cultural heritage could serve as assets and catalysts to "strengthen community bonds and form new hubs of social activity", as suggested by Beck and Brooks via a heritage reuse case in Portsmouth, UK [11]. Leveraging heritage for community development, especially in the rural realm, has also appeared to be an essential component in the formation of the rural and eco-tourism movement and economic development, as demonstrated by Yen Tu's success story in Vietnam [12].

In contrast to the years of placemaking expertise in the United States, Australia, Europe, and other Asian countries, placemaking is comparatively not as developed in Hong Kong as an industry and practice. Hong Kong has few past cases and attempts, let alone ones that made use of heritage and culture as a basis and tool. The interest and experiments have so far inclined to focus on the urban realm with the use of tactical urbanism (e.g. use of mobile and modular street furniture,) and programmes (e.g. events and festivals) at places like pocket parks, promenades, and streets in city centres. Such efforts have led to an increase in foot traffic, a revival of street life and public space [13,14]. However, the temporal nature and the overlooked role of engagement, heritage and culture lead to the question of whether a lasting sense of place, community and empowerment can be built via tactical placemaking efforts, and whether the space used could truly be turned into "lived spaces" as Lefebvre would argue [15]. As Wyckoff defined, tactical placemaking is for demonstrating "low cost proxies" to expensive physical improvements, but not the type of placemaking for building vibrant communities and quality spaces [16]. The merits and importance of engaging citizens in placemaking process has been proved. As Strydom *et al.* concluded, the trend of spatial placemaking was shifting from a focus on "physical change of the environment" to "an enabling tool...to facilitate the making places" by non-planners [17]. Kolotouchkina also showed how the citizen engagement strategy for place-making efforts in Tokyo Olympics fostered "inclusivity, commitment and sense of belonging" and "actualised citizenship" [18]. We believe that a holistic approach to leverage different types of heritage and culture in urban and rural environments as tools of community building could further Hong Kong's placemaking efforts and exemplify the merits of placemaking, especially in sense of place, community building and empowerment.

2. Methodology

The framework developed by Ellery and Ellery, and further refined in Ellery *et al.*, integrated the “potential impact of community engagement on the development of an individual’s sense of place (SOP), based on Arnstein’s Ladder of Citizen Participation” [19, 20]. The framework (redrawn in Figure 1) shows how a person’s positive sense of place increases along Arnstein’s Ladder of Citizen Participation (from “non-participation”, “tokenism” to “degrees of citizen power”), as they engage more intensively in “community driven placemaking” as opposed to “externally imposed placemaking”. Citizen engagement is deemed an important process that helps build individuals’ sense of place, which could further be enhanced in proportionate to their engagement in the placemaking process. The extent of sense of place could be further understood via the categorisation created by Shamai [21] (adapted in Table 1). This paper takes Ellery *et al.*’s framework and Shamai’s categorisations into account as an assessment tool to evaluate heritage-based placemaking approaches in Hong Kong and understand how these approaches correspond to achieving the various stages of civic engagement and levels of sense of place and community.

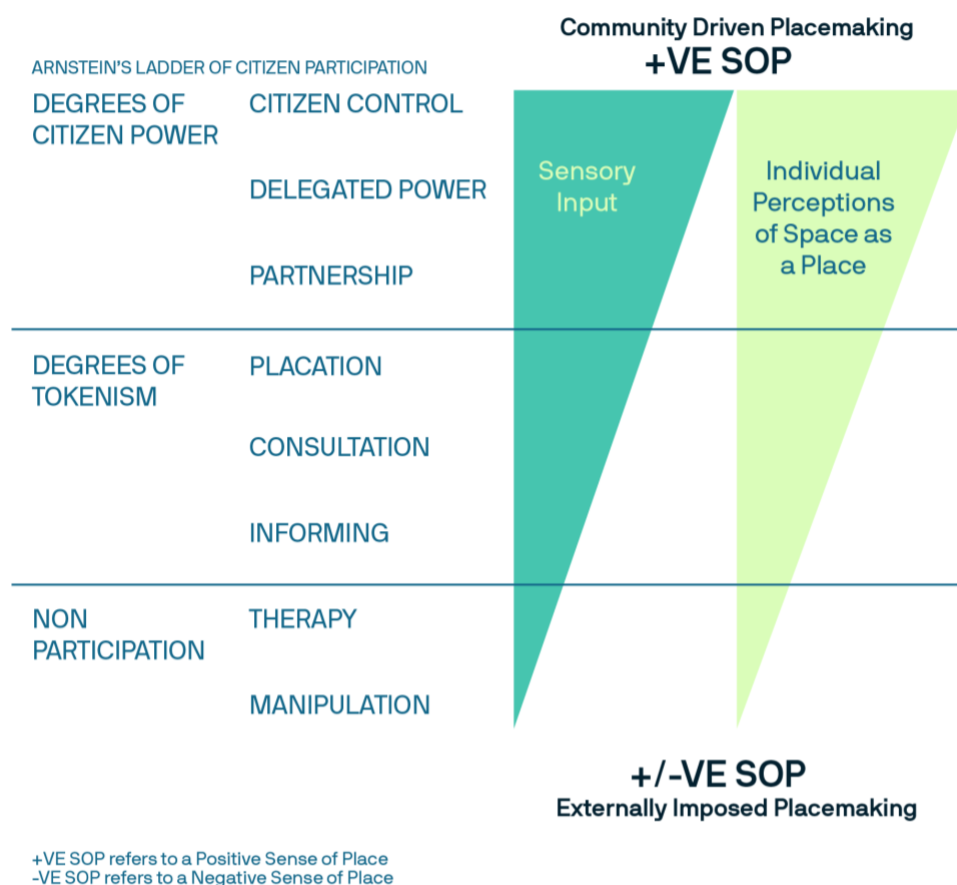


Fig. 1. Framework integrating Arnstein’s Ladder of Citizen Participation and concept of sense of place, developed by Ellery *et al.*, redrawn by authors

Table 1
Shamai's levels of sense of place

Level	Behavior
0 Not having any sense of place	No awareness of place
1 Knowledge of being located in a place	Aware of symbols but have no feelings
2 Belonging to a place	Respect and feel for the place
3 Attachment to a place	Place is unique to the person
4 Identifying with the place goal	Devote and loyal to the place's needs
5 Involvement in a place	Active role in community and invest own resources for the place
6 Sacrifice for a place	Ready to give up personal and collective attributes for the place

Note. Adapted from "Sense of Place: An Empirical Measurement" by S. Shamai, 1991, *Geoforum*, 22(3), p347-358.

Three case studies are chosen as the subjects of evaluation, they are developed by One Bite Design Studio (onebite), a Hong Kong-based interdisciplinary design company that develops placemaking projects to shape places and build community connections. As a baseline criterion, these three projects made use of culture and heritage as a medium and tool to facilitate the making of place and shaping of identity. To ensure a meaningful comparison, these projects are picked due to their variations in the following parameters: spatial environments in terms of urban and rural, forms of space ownerships, and types of culture and heritage leveraged. "Trolley Central" investigates the intangible and grassroots culture of trolley usage amidst urban streetscapes, onebite re-tells this story via an exhibition hosted in a revitalised heritage venue. "Project House @1QRW" makes use of a privately-owned heritage building in the city centre and turns it into a communal third space. "Sai Kung Hoi Arts Festival" spans across outlying islands and places the fading rural village and island culture and history onto the main stage curated with artists and local villagers. Qualitative accounts of the projects and the involved users and citizens were used for the analysis and comparison. These three uniquely disparate projects could shed light on how culture and heritage can play a part in placemaking and community building in different extents.

3. Results

3.1 Trolley Central: Celebrating Everyday Culture in the City

Using the heritage site Tai Kwun as the backdrop, onebite designed the exhibition "Trolley Central" for Tai Kwun Heritage Team to celebrate a much-overlooked culture and tradition of trolleys, and the craftsmanship behind them. Trolleys have become such an integral part of our sloped city for the transportation of goods, yet very often overlooked exactly because it has become part of the everyday scene and not noteworthy in their appearance.

By showcasing and appreciating these trolleys, this exhibition aimed to honour their creators and users. For instance, Chiu Kee specialised in this craft but shut down and retired in 2017. It used hand tools, such as hammers, and other basic machinery to construct the trolleys, which were supported by iron and steel bars. Thankfully, Chiu Kee donated their trolley-making equipment to an organisation that promotes cycling and community development to pass on the legacy. However, more often than not, the knowledge and skills associated with this traditional craft would fade away quietly upon a company's closure and retirement of its craftsmen.

The trolley is a manifestation of the everyday life and culture of the central business district. For decades, trolleys have been the key tool for transporting all kinds of goods, from parcels, soft drinks, and newspapers, to groceries, mail, garbage and anything in between. These trolleys, and their movement, represent a significant flow of business and commerce happening in the city, against the backdrop of the evolving urban fabric. The tracks of iron trolleys were imprinted onto the brick pavements and concrete roads of Hong Kong; we hardly notice how important yet mundane trolleys

are ingrained in urban life as everyday tools, and how they have adapted to the rugged terrain of the Central and Western District.

In addition to the dark blue trolleys and other common types of trolleys we usually see, the exhibition also featured stories of everyday people who rely on them as a means of livelihood and have modified trolleys to facilitate their particular uses. Deriving from this interesting discovery, the community design team Making On Loft conducted research in the community to understand the needs of the various users in the district, showcased the collected versions, and used this exhibition to expand the imagination of the future design of trolleys. These different versions not only acknowledged the army of hardworking workers sustaining our community through their deliveries using trolleys, but also highlighted how the undulating terrain and the bumpy stone pavements of the Central and Western District have shaped the durability and functionality of our trolleys.

3.1.1 Interactive Storytelling to Build a Sense of Belonging

The exhibition was held in the open area of Tai Kwun, a sizable revitalised heritage complex in Central, right in the middle of the central business district. This open space allowed the free flow of pedestrians' entry and passing-through, creating numerous opportunities for interaction with the exhibits and the stories told. The wheels of trolleys served as the key inspiration for the layout and design of Trolley Central's main features. The 18 exhibition platforms, which showcased various trolley types and employed a range of mobile and interactive display techniques to present history and stories in an inventive and entertaining way, used the circular shape of wheels as a primary motif (Figure 2). Rather than passively absorbing historical facts and narratives from panels heavy on text, participants could engage with the exhibits and "push" history along based on what drew them in.

The colourful and interactive design employed in the exhibition made this common item approachable and visually appealing to the general public (Figure 3). Visitors could comprehend how the Central and Western Districts' topography and history made trolleys a crucial component of goods delivery and convenience, by learning about what makes Hong Kong trolleys unique.

As the exhibition designer, onebite aimed to highlight the importance of commonplace objects and their impact on daily lives. We hope that audiences would not only become more curious about local culture and feel more a part of the city, but also gain a deeper understanding of the unseen but essential work that keeps this city running. We believe that a sense of belonging towards the city's culture can take root within the everyday aspect of life.



Fig. 2. The circular shape of wheels served as a primary motif of the exhibition design



Fig. 3. Colourful and interactive design made this common item approachable to the public

3.2 Project House @1 Queen's Road West: Restoring Vibrancy of a Heritage Building

From an intangible form of culture and heritage of everyday life in Trolley Central, Project House is an initiative stemming from the tangible physical form of heritage. Project House is hosted at 1 Queen's Road West (1QRW), a privately-owned Grade 3 historical building¹ (Figure 4). Located at a busy road junction in the residential and commercial district Sheung Wan, this 3-storey tenement building (known as “*tonglau*”) was built in the 1920s, boasting a century of history, yet its facade and decorative elements are well-kept and restored recently. For most of the time since its establishment, this building was owned by the Chans, who operated “Yau Kee Hop”, a Cantonese-style roast meat store. The Chans stopped running the store during the 1980s, and since then, rented the ground floor space out to different businesses, e.g. convenience stores, clothing boutiques. Five years ago, the building's ownership was transferred to a private owner. Instead of demolishing the *tonglau* and replacing the building with a high-rise, the new owner decided to preserve this building and spent generously in renovating the significant features, e.g. terrazzo columns with traditional calligraphy writing; a rare move in Hong Kong's heritage conservation landscape.



Fig. 4. Project House @1QRW is housed in a Grade 3 historical building in bustling city centre

3.2.1 Opening underutilised space for communal use

With a heart to contribute to the community, the new owner invited onebite to implement our placemaking initiative Project House on the ground floor. Originated in 2017, Project House turned underutilised vacant street-level shops into temporary communal spaces that allow socially-purposed organisations to host events and services, ultimately matching community resources and needs.

In July 2023, Project House @1QRW turned the vacant street front shop into a pop-up community space for 7 weeks. The space welcomed nearly 2,000 residents and participants, and organised over 100 events with 40 cross-disciplinary partners, namely companies, social enterprises, NGOs, artists,

¹ In Hong Kong, the Antiquities Advisory Board (AAB) has assessed and awarded grading for 1,444 historic buildings, gradings come in 3 grades and of the following definition:

“Grade 1: Buildings of outstanding merit, which every effort should be made to preserve if possible.

Grade 2: Buildings of special merit; efforts should be made to selectively preserve.

Grade 3: Buildings of some merit; preservation in some form would be desirable and alternative means could be considered if preservation is not practicable.” [22] Graded buildings are different from Declared Monuments, which are prevented from alterations by the Gazette [23].

cultural groups, local shops, etc. Albeit a small space of less than 300 sq. ft., all kinds of events took hold successfully (Figure 5), e.g. movie screening, pop-up cafe, clothes swap, free haircuts, handicraft classes, health checks, yoga classes, busking, etc.



Fig. 5. New form of activities like busking taking place in a heritage building

Such intensive operation demonstrated the flexibility and potential of this tiny space. Moreover, it revealed a huge yearning for a third space among residents across age groups and socio-economic backgrounds. Through daily interaction and observation, we had the opportunity to understand which were the popular happenings and services, discovered unmet needs of the surrounding community, e.g. social exclusion and loneliness, and learnt about the community. We were able to identify people who displayed huge interest in the space, and residents who visited the space regularly and started to develop a belonging to this communal space.

3.2.2 Building regular happenings and new social bonding

After the initial pop-up, Project House was able to continue operating thanks to the positive support from both the public and private sectors. More regular events and social services were added to serve elderlies living alone. “Community Shared Space” is a free space where anyone can come in and relax, eat takeaway, take a break or just talk and mingle with other neighbours. It was essentially an indoor public area equipped with WiFi, a water dispenser, and a restroom, but open to people of all ages and is greatly appreciated by users. Typically, only outdoor parks allow such a diverse crowd. Otherwise, users mostly hang out at nearby elderly centres, which only allow them to meet people of similar ages and backgrounds.

At this point, the weekly activities and services included consultations with Chinese physicians, health checks, counselling, meditations, clothing repair, and childcare. These weekly events began to draw regular attendees, who have since forged new bonds (Figure 6). For instance, regulars from various social backgrounds attended the mediation classes, these strangers have progressively developed a unique bond and evolved into a well-being support group that genuinely cares for one another. They are willing to bring to the classes favourite dishes and some even became friends and meet outside class for meals.



Fig. 6. Regular programmes and events built new social bonding

During this phase, the Sheung Wan Community Nanny Team and Sewing Squad were also developed. Residents aged above 50 make up both teams, they have resources and strengths that can match the neighbourhood needs in their own ways. Various factors initially drew these team members to Project House (e.g., joining handicraft classes and health checks), and this created opportunities for onebite to learn about their needs, interests and strengths. We realised that many female users were interested in handicrafts and particularly sewing; many used to work in factories during industrial era and were yearning to pick up the skills again. Thus, the creation of Sewing Squad is a logical assembly point for these locals, providing them with a venue to network with like-minded enthusiasts and retrain their skills. Meanwhile, we observed how retirees have plenty of free time but lack social circles and the drive to participate in social activities. We paired their time and resources with low-income moms who need help with childcare. Being part of the teams allows these seniors to give back to the community in new ways, as well as to build new connections with neighbours, or even new social and support circles.

From a static, confined space that is only important historically to the locals, who hardly have any interaction with it and only have access to its external features, Project House has turned into a physical and mental space for residents to meet, connect, and form new social circles. Although the renovated building with new functions might be the first reason these seniors noticed Project House, this space has slowly carried on new social functions, creating new meaning and significance in the social realm. The residents' participation and interaction are the reasons why new programmes and functions could develop, take shape, and become established.

3.2.3 Heritage as an anchor

Many found it difficult to understand the idea of a free third space accessible to everyone. First, the shop, situated in a prime retail area, could ask for a high rent. It is incomprehensible to many that the building's owner chose conservation and make it publicly accessible in a city where many historic structures are destroyed or abandoned. Additionally, open space is scarce in Hong Kong's densely populated urban fabric, with an average of 2.7 square metres of open space per person [24], let alone indoor, air-conditioned, shaded areas like Project House. The first two weeks of the operation saw lots of doubtful comments.

Eventually, these barriers were broken by the building's historical significance. Elderlies' stories started to flood the space; instead of walking past the building or being sceptical about it, seniors walked in sharing their personal memories of the building. Many recalled old days when their parents would purchase from Mr. Chan during festivities, and some added new stories and anecdotes about the shop and the neighbourhood. Some seniors who had moved out of Sheung Wan even visited from

other districts, knowing that this building of childhood times was kept. Activities were also curated to capture the heritage value of the building and the neighbourhood. Walking tours and sharing focused on the historical fabric of the surroundings, while terrazzo classes were a direct response to the building's terrazzo columns. These activities were able to amplify the stories to a wider audience from other districts and enhance their awareness of this place.

The restoration and activation of the building brought solace and hope to many, including heritage enthusiasts, nostalgic seniors, and curious passers-by. Restoring the building is only a prerequisite and the foundation, we believe that it is the utilisation of the ground floor space as a communal area that serves as the key success factor of drawing the crowd. This space is accessible due to its convenient location, mostly open with its extensive opening hours, visible and welcoming from within via the glass doors, and vibrant and inclusive with different activities that cater to a wide range of users. These qualities, complementing each other, allow Project House to go beyond the building itself to building the Sheung Wan community.

3.4 Sai Kung Hoi Arts Festival: Rebuilding Rural Communities And Reimagining Island Possibilities

Whilst Project House takes root within a small footprint at a *tonglau* in the city, Sai Kung Hoi Arts Festival (SKH) takes culture and heritage placemaking from a completely different realm. This three-year cultural initiative, with support from Hong Kong Geopark and its organiser Hong Kong Tourism Commission, takes place in Sai Kung, an urban fringe town dubbed the “back garden of Hong Kong”, known for its fishing villages, scenery, hiking trails, beaches and islands, and geological formations. As curator of this festival, onebite brings rural heritage and artists together, creating storytelling art pieces that reinterpret the hidden and long-forgotten traditions and rituals of four outlying islands, each has its unique history.

Yim Tin Tsai dated back three centuries, originally inhabited by the Hakkas, who engaged in salt-making and fishing, the islanders embraced Catholicism in the 19th century. Restoration efforts began in 2004, leading to the development of cultural and eco-tourism. Sharp Island boasts dramatic volcanic outcrops shaped over 140 million years, this uninhabited island captivates visitors with its unique tombolo and boulders. High Island served as a supply station for ships and is now connected to the Sai Kung peninsula through dams, it is home to the Hakka villages of Tung A, Pak A, Pak Lap, and the fishing village of Sha Kiu. Previously a Hakka settlement, Kau Sai Chau only has a few elderly residents remain, while the fishing community that once thrived there has largely moved.

3.4.1 Uncovering and translating rural heritage

Although SKH wants to expand upon the rich cultural and historical background of these islands, much like in many rural areas, lots of their history was passed down orally, and some events remain unrecorded and undocumented. Therefore, learning about the legends, customs, and rituals of the villages was SKH's first task. Yim Tin Tsai is more developed in terms of their village revitalisation process and efforts; over the past 20 years, numerous parties, including the government, NGOs and universities, have produced plenty of documentation. Meanwhile, there are basic artefacts and story-display spaces set up at Kau Sai Chau and High Island, but there is still little research and information available online. High Island's expansive topography made this an even more challenging place to gather data.

After attempts to scout for information online, the team concentrated on establishing rapport and trust with local stakeholders, such as the village chiefs, temple committees, and residents. The team was able to gather more stories and oral histories by meeting and interviewing locals thanks to these established communication channels. This process of documentation sparked collective memories recollection as villagers retold their stories in a group set-up. onebite was also able to take this occasion

to reconnect with old villagers who had left for decades and provided valuable information unfound in any other sources.

This fundamental and expansive knowledge led to the creation of background briefs for artists' invitations and inspired them to come up with ideas in response to the distinctive history and culture. To assist artists with the development of their artwork concepts, site visits and interactive activities were organised. For example, onebite hosted in Yim Tin Tsai a two-day-one-night camp where scholars, village chiefs, and locals gave in-depth introductions. This allowed artists to explore the island both during the day and at night, normally impossible due to the lack of transportation and accommodation on the island. From then, regular communication channels were set up and onebite served as an intermediary between the artists and local stakeholders.

Via such immersive experiences and intensive communication between the artists, curators and local stakeholders, the in-situ artworks of SKH are very much a direct response and reinterpretation of the precious stories told. In Yim Tin Tsai, artists were inspired by the salt-making and Catholic influence on the island. Impressed by the shape of the dragon spine water wheel, a vital tool in the salt-making industry, the artwork "Water Dragon" (by Joseph Chan) recreates the wave-like rhythm and sound of flowing water (Figure 7). Positioned facing the salt field, the installation aims to evoke the history of the old water wheel and encourage interaction and understanding of its significance. "👐" (by Dylan Kwok) is a manifestation of "Everything is in God's Hands" (Figure 8). The site is located at the sixth spot, "Resurrection", along Father Dominic Chan's "Nature Trail of Reconciliation". The location was situated adjacent to The Holy Ground, also known as Yim Tin Tsai's graveyard. The winding path was a meditative journey to inner peace, in response to the religious influence on the island.



Fig. 7. Water Dragon was inspired by the dragon spine water wheel used in salt-making

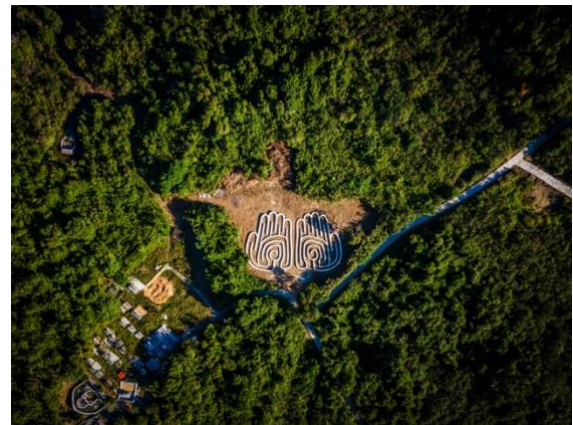


Fig. 8. 👐 as a response to the Catholic influence on the island Yim Tin Tsai

Kau Sai Chau's fishing heydays motivated bamboo artist Inkgo Lam to create the piece "Sails" (Figure 9). Along with the Kau Sai Chau villagers, Lam studied the structure of sails and learned how to make fishing nets from them. The head sail (front), the big sail (middle), and the third sail (back) are the three traditional Chinese sails, each illustrating the distinct phases of a fishing trip's mood swings: heading out to sea, continuing the journey, and heading back home. The playground and abandoned Leung Shun Bay Public School on High Island drew the attention of Napp Studio & Architects and Fragrant Village, who imagined it as a gathering place for kids from the island's various villages. The group composed a new school anthem in collaboration with former students of the public school, and the sound installation "Rhythmic LANE" mimicked the anthem's melody playfully and interactively (Figure 10).



Fig. 9. Sails responded to the fishing heydays of Kau Sai Chau



Fig. 10. Rhythmic LANE mimicked the new school anthem created with former students of the public school

3.4.2 Empowering villagers and encouraging lasting participation

While Yim Tin Tsai has experience lending their island to art festivals and receiving tourists, the other two villages had little understanding of art festivals and in the beginning, could not comprehend the concept and how it was relevant to them. They were not hostile to the idea, but could not figure out how they were in a place to support. The team created different ways to engage the villagers and turn them from passive audiences to active participants of the festival.

Local stakeholders played a significant role in the curation of artwork. As they are the ones who know the islands best and will be directly impacted by the artwork, the villagers suggested the locations and arrangement of the pieces. Furthermore, during facilitated meetings, artists discussed their ideas with the villagers, and were met with prompt and straightforward responses. Village representatives played a major part in the final artwork selection process, which was a novel experience for many and changed the role of villagers from informed observers to curators and decision-makers.

Software is as essential to SKH, a range of tours and programmes were developed utilising the oral history gathered from the numerous in-person interviews with the villagers. The creation of the tours offered a fantastic chance to gather information about the history and stories in a structured manner and create comprehensive docent resources that would be useful for the future. The villages took an active part in the creation and organisation of numerous events and experiences; this was an innovative cooperative experience that put the villagers at the centre of the festival. Events like sea urchin harvesting, fishing net weaving, fishing, Hakka traditional food cooking, dragon boat sailing, salt-making and Kirin dance experiences are a few examples of how the villagers' strengths were utilised and demonstrated (Figure 11).

onebite co-developed these interactive experiences with the villages, transforming them into publicly engaging activities. onebite played the role of host and organiser at the events, ensuring a smooth running and a curated experience. The goal of this kind of cooperation is to enable the villagers to develop their knowledge and ability so that they can continue offering these services in the future (Figure 12). Many of them were not aware that they could spread their heritage and culture in these ways and took away valuable lessons.



Fig. 11. Dragon Boat experience hosted by villagers



Fig. 12. Former fishermen demonstrating their skills to the public and re-telling their history

Through this extensive process of engaging in the festival and retelling their stories to a huge audience, villagers built up huge pride and boosted a sense of belonging and community. While some were united in caring deeply about their history and worried about legacy-building, many were not organised and had not considered how they could contribute to culture preservation. These experiences created opportunities for them to get engaged and develop their role in the community.

3.4.3 From one-off festivals to sustainable village development

Many villagers find it hard to see the connection between arts and their rural lives. The village population has drastically decreased over the years; older generations have either left or migrated, while younger generations have moved out for careers and families. Therefore, a large number of abandoned and decaying homes are present, and some villages are in ruins. The remaining villagers were concerned about how to preserve the villages and improve the standard of daily life simultaneously.

SKH was able to make use of this festival to bring concrete changes to existing everyday lives, and thus create possibilities to imagine the future of village preservation and development with the locals. Economically, SKH demonstrated new ways of income generation leveraging the villages' natural assets and strengths. The creation of interactive experiences for the public allowed villagers to earn programme fees, and with streams of tourists coming, it also led to the role of village ambassadors, mostly elders who have retired and could tell vivid stories of their lives and village culture. SKH also invited villagers to revive the operation of Community Stores during the festival, selling traditional snacks and drinks to visitors. Normally, villagers who have moved to the city would only come back to cook at annual festivities like the Hung Shing Festival. SKH created an occasion for villagers to come back, many aunts took the responsibility and greatly enjoyed this space to rekindle bonding.

During these past two years, SKH has brought over 130,000 visitors to the villages. In the long run, as the islands are now known to many, the villages have gained hands-on experiences to continue running these activities and tours, but also to re-create and further develop new offerings. In the past, villages had stopped most economic activities as Hong Kong moved away from agriculture and fishing and the islands' population dipped. It was a vicious cycle: as younger generations could not make a living in villages, they had to leave for the urban centres. SKH's experiences expanded the current model of income generation and created room for developing new ways of financial sustainability for the next generation and newcomers.

Furthermore, SKH made a noticeable improvement to the villagers' living conditions and infrastructure. Resuming the small ferry service (known as Kaito) with government support was one of the biggest accomplishments. The islands were extremely difficult to reach and inconvenient for

many before then, the resurgence of transport hugely improves the village-city. The villagers realised that by leveraging SKH and tourism development, they might strengthen their ability to mobilise support from the government and demand greater amenities. This presents an opportunity to introduce services like better Wifi and mobile signals, improved connectivity and road conditions, and the addition of makeshift washrooms.

With better physical connections, everyday conveniences, and new opportunities for economic development, the villagers began to envision how it could be feasible to turn the village into an alluring place for newcomers to settle in and for younger generations to move back. We see a potential for sustainable village development stemming from an apparently one-time art festival, novel approaches to establishing and maintaining village communities may emerge.

3.5 Discussion

3.5.1 Leveraging culture and heritage

These three placemaking projects demonstrated that regardless of urban and rural settings, and whether the heritage is of tangible or intangible forms, culture and heritage can foster a profound sense of identity, place and community. Culture and heritage form the roots of identity formation [25]. When culture and heritage are being retold and represented, memories are evoked and dialogues take place naturally. At Project House, the elderlies who passed by the renovated heritage building were naturally triggered to share their past memories with other users of the space, who would add to the stories with their own, and in the process, all conversations were building up “one’s understanding of their own culture, history, and values” (Hao) [26]. Such shared memories and communication fortress the shared sense of place and simultaneously, reassert one’s personal identity in relation to the community setting, be it physical or social.

When culture and heritage are reinterpreted in different forms, such as in an interactive manner and reimagination of the use of trolley in the exhibition of Trolley Central; or when diverse activities and services take place in Project House with a renewed nature of the heritage; or when rural folklore and religion are reinterpreted into artworks of completely different form, e.g. Kau Sai Chau’s fishing history and their journey was manifested into the public installation “Sails”, new functions and meanings are created for these cultural heritage; it is essentially a process of meaning-making. Such are new memories and shared experiences of a different crowd, layered on top of old ones, building intersectional identities and communities within the same space.

3.5.2 Facilitating the sense of place

Leveraging the discussed framework, the forms of engagement for each project and their corresponding level of citizen participation and outcomes are summarised in Table 2. As Ellery and Ellery has rightly argued, “the degree to which a sense of place is developed within a host community is influenced by the degree to which the community is engaged and responsible for the outcomes in the planning and development process.” [20] The outcomes are clearly different for the three projects that offer different forms of engagement opportunities. Trolley Central provided a shallow interaction with individuals being passive audiences. They were informed and established new knowledge of the community, which in turn enhanced the “degree of familiarity with a place”, a factors suggested by Najafi and Shariff [27], but did not build emotional feelings. Project House allowed individuals to join the services and activities as participants, and a few of them were able to shape the space and programmes, and create “new forms of social encounters” as proven by Mui *et al.* [28]. Yet, participants were not involved in deciding overall strategies and operations of the space. In SKH, villagers have become highly involved in the festival in multi-faceted ways. From the state of being consulted, the villagers have moved up along the Ladder of Citizen Participation, forming collaborative

partnerships with onebite in the curation and hosting of public experiences, as well as gaining delegated power in making decisions on the selection of artworks and installation venues. As the villagers actively participate in the festival, there is a clear formation and maturation of their identity as villagers, their pride and belonging to the community, and their willingness to participate and contribute. People who co-create their surroundings have a greater sense of ownership and responsibility, which boosts their self-esteem and makes them more invested in the place they call community and home. Being involved also gives people a sense of empowerment because they can influence the decisions that shape their community.

Table 2
Summary of projects' community engagement and outcomes

Projects	Forms of community engagement	Ladder of citizen participation	Outcomes (sense of place and community)
Trolley Central	View and interact with the exhibition	Tokenism - Informing	Level 1: aware of the place and its symbol trolley
Project House	Participate, volunteer and create new activities and new forms of social relationships	Tokenism - Consultation and Placation	Level 2 and 3: emotional connections and belonging to the historical building
SKH	Decide art pieces and locations, curate and organise tourism experiences	Citizen power – Partnership and Delegated Power	Level 5: invest personal resources for village development

3.5.3 New model of rural revitalisation and development

Over the years, there have been different revitalisation models for rural areas in Hong Kong and across the globe. SKH is an attempt to leverage rural heritage and history, retelling the stories in the form of an arts festival to appeal to the public and draw in tourists, ultimately sustaining and rejuvenating the villages and islands by providing an alternative model to rural economic development and a justification for essential infrastructure improvements and development.

The goal of SKH was to create a captivating and immersive experience that highlighted the unique past and traditions of the rural communities. The festival brought the cultural identity of each village or island to life through a wide range of artistic expressions, such as visual arts, performances, traditional crafts, and interactive installations. Local performers, artists, and artisans were vital to the festival, lending their skills and expertise to highlight the distinctive characteristics of the area.

The festival was crucial in revitalising the villages and islands by attracting tourists. It served as a spark for a new type of tourism, drawing people who were interested in the lesser-known rural regions. The tourism surge helped the local economy, small businesses including restaurants and shops reaped the benefits of increased patronage. The festival's success demonstrated the possibility of a sustainable income source for the communities, showing the path of preserving their cultural heritage while maintaining their livelihood. In addition, the festival acted as a catalyst for infrastructure improvement. The increase in tourists necessitated upgrades to the facilities, amenities, and transportation. As a result, local government invested in improving visitor services and public transport. Not only did these infrastructure improvements improve the overall experience for visitors, but they also raised the standard of living for the inhabitants. Hopefully, this would create new opportunities for employment and entrepreneurship, reducing the need for moving to urban areas.

SKH presented an alternative approach to sustainable development for these rural communities on the urban fringe. Instead of abandoning local heritage, the festival leveraged them as foundational assets to develop novel possibilities. It not only instilled a sense of pride and appreciation among residents for their unique cultural assets but helped foster collective responsibility for their preservation

and a positive outline of the future development and revitalisation of their villages. Our question remains if this is an applicable model to other rural villages.

4. Conclusions

Whilst placemaking as a practice is still developing its maturity in Hong Kong, this paper attempts to expand the possibilities and employed strategies of placemaking in town, so that similar efforts go beyond the usual practice of tactical hardware and software interventions focusing on the urban realm, and alleviate the current issues of lack of lasting impacts and empowered communities. With the case studies of Trolley Central, Project House @1QRW, and Sai Kung Hoi Arts Festival, this paper examines the role of culture and heritage in placemaking and how they can serve as ideal entry points to engage audiences to different extents: be it to inform and involve on a lighter level to build awareness and evoke sense of place like Trolley Central, or to collaborate with residents intensively and make decisions together, ultimately empowering and facilitating the process to community-centric and bottom-up placemaking in SKH. Culture and heritage have proven to be an essential ingredient to the building of one's sense of place, personal identity in the community, and the sense of belonging, and therefore should be necessarily addressed and factored into future placemaking attempts in both urban and rural settings in Hong Kong.

Given the result of positive relationship between the level of community engagement and the sense of place shown in this paper, future placemaking efforts should also build in its planning a trajectory of users' ladder of participation before project commencement. As such, when the project develops and matures, it is designed that the role of users could shift from passive audiences to active participants and decision makers. As Wichowsky *et al.* showed via a case study in the United States [29], an empowered community is key to lasting the impacts of the placemaking initiative and maintaining the quality places produced. Such not only requires placemaking practitioners to adjust the conventional work stages and the design of the placemaking programmes, but to build new skills and knowledge of community's capacity building.

Lastly, the paper also aspires to spark the exploration and conversations on how leveraging culture and heritage as placemaking tools can rise above building quality places. Instead, it can even serve as a novel approach to rejuvenation and revitalisation of rural communities by developing an alternative tourism economic model based on cultural and natural assets and building villagers' sense of pride, place and community. The SKH case has shown overwhelmingly positive results in which villagers are ready to commit to the highest level of citizen participation and sense of place – to make full decision to govern the programme and to sacrifice for the ideals of the place. This case suggests that the approach should be further experimented and has the potential of developing into a long-term sustainable village community development model in Hong Kong, and possibly in Asia.

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