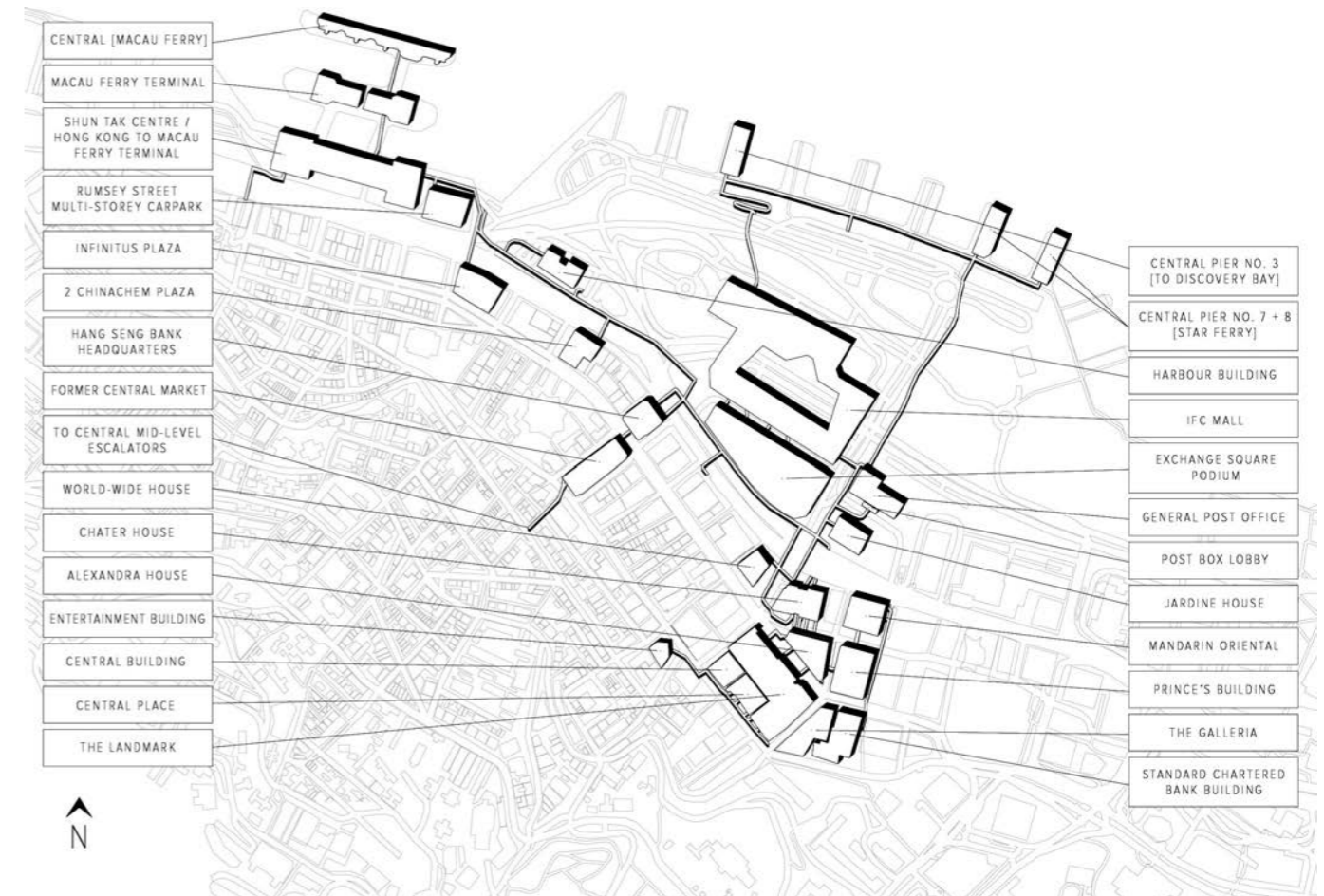


## Agency In Appropriation: The informal territory of foreign domestic helpers in Hong Kong

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### ABSTRACT

Every Sunday, groups of Foreign Domestic Helpers (FDHs) collectively create informal territories within the urban fabric of Hong Kong's Central Business District (CBD). FDHs are migrant workers living in Hong Kong who are legally bound to live in their employers' homes. They work six days a week, and their duties and lifestyles are dictated by their employers, making them one of the most marginalised occupational groups in the city. Every Sunday – their day off – FDHs gather in public en masse to exercise freedom outside of their contractual confinement. In Hong Kong's CBD these weekly assemblies of Filipino workers disrupt the city's hegemonic spaces of financial capital. Various urban interior and exterior spaces – shop fronts, footpaths, elevated walkways and atriums – are appropriated and transformed with makeshift cardboard constructions. Hong Kong's public-private zones are augmented into temporary domesticised places where the migrant workers socialise, rest, eat, groom, send packages, protest, dance and preach. At first glance, the FDHs' occupation of public space may appear chaotically disordered, or an 'ethnic spectacle'. Closer analysis reveals that this ritualised inhabitation has a unique ecology; it is a temporary but repeated socio-spatial system that produces a collective culture of solidarity, resistance and resourcefulness. Drawing upon ethnographic observations, interviews, photographs and spatial analysis, this paper explores the socio-political and cultural implications of this informal occupation. It demonstrates how FDHs are much more than docile subjects of domestic labour, rather, they are actors with agency, operating in an intermediate and mutable spatial zone, somewhere between the private and public sphere.



The first time I documented Foreign Domestic Helpers (FDHs) in Hong Kong was in 2012. It was a Sunday afternoon and I was walking along the Central Elevated Walkway (CEW), a system of elevated walkways that connects over twenty-four buildings in the Central Business District (CBD). The CEW affords an alternative circulation to the urban density on the ground, as the elevated conduits weave in, out and between buildings on a suspended horizontal plane. The major destinations of the district can be conveniently experienced without setting foot on the ground.

As I wandered into the former Central Market Arcade, most of the shops were closed, with shutters down. The arcade – with a closed row of shops on the right and a vacant gallery space on the left – served as a pedestrian corridor, and a steady stream of tourists and locals flowed through. My focus shifted from the closed retail spaces to the people sitting in front of them, on the floor. Groups of women were sitting on flattened cardboard boxes; eating, chatting and sleeping. They had small suitcases and bags placed within delineated spaces. Some groups had set up their cardboard boxes upright, or used opened umbrellas to form

Above  
Figure 1: Network of buildings connected by the Central Elevated Walkway.  
Original digital image: Evelyn Kwok and Blake Jurmann, 2015.

barriers between themselves and the passing pedestrians. The women's shoes were placed on the periphery of the cardboard mats, resembling the common Asian practice of removing shoes when entering a home.

Taking in the scene in front of me, it became evident that I was standing within an informal FDH territory. As a Hong Kong-born Chinese-Australian living in Sydney, I had regular interactions with FDHs during my childhood in Hong Kong. However, on this particular Sunday, I was overwhelmed by the intensity of their collective occupation of public space.

A few moments later I reached the end of the arcade and witnessed more FDHs occupying the next section of the CEW that connects to the Hang Seng Bank skyscraper. Here the FDHs were also sitting on cardboard boxes, although they had not constructed vertical dividers between their space and the pedestrians. The width of the walkway was narrower than the arcade and I followed the pedestrians in front of me in single file, moving awkwardly through and between groups of seated women, who seemed to be intensely focused on each other, conversing in Tagalog. It was an uncomfortable experience because it felt as though I was trespassing through the private spaces of an exclusive FDH community.

Later on I spoke in Cantonese to Hong Kong locals about this Sunday phenomenon. The locals mostly expressed their frustration at how congested, dirty or noisy Central becomes due to the overwhelming number of FDHs. By contrast, when I spoke to Filipino FDHs, they affectionately dubbed their gatherings in Central as 'Little Manila'. In other words, it was home.

Of the approximately 300,000 FDHs that live in Hong Kong, the majority come from the Philippines and Indonesia.<sup>1</sup> On Sunday, Central is dominated by Filipino FDHs, while Indonesian FDHs gather in Causeway Bay. In Central, a variety of urban interior and exterior spaces offer a range of goods and services to the Filipino community. The store World Wide House provides Filipino food and magazines, while World Wide Lane sells international phone cards. Central's Chater Road provides

open spaces for choreographed dancing and political rallies, and Connaught Road Central transforms into a packing and loading zone for 'care packages', typically postmarked for the Philippines.

Very early on Sunday mornings, Little Manila emerges. Flattened cardboard boxes are placed by FDHs in different parts of Central, symbolising their informal ownership. The cardboard boxes are used by the FDHs to construct makeshift home bases for temporary habitation. Each group returns to the same space every Sunday, and the gathering areas are informally grouped according to Filipino provinces and regions.<sup>2</sup> Every Sunday, Central is transformed by the construction and infiltration of Little Manila, producing a temporary but repeated socio-spatial system of layered, overlapping spaces; an ethnic enclave, a site of contention and a domestic territory.

During field trips between 2012 and 2015, I spent numerous Sundays in Central observing the spatial operations and experiencing the social world of Little Manila. I first spoke with a FDH who works for a relative. In turn, she introduced me to her group of friends, and from there, the network of interviewees expanded.<sup>3</sup> FDHs are often wrongly perceived from the outside as helpless migrant women. In interviews, many of these women acknowledged the hardship of living and working in a foreign country, but they did not want to be cast as 'victims'. They emphasised their solidarity as a community, and they do not shy away from objecting to exploitative situations.

As a spatial design analyst, my main concerns are with the methods by which FDHs appropriate public space, augmenting space into domesticised places, thus producing a collective culture. Specifically, I am interested in understanding how their agency as a marginalised contingent is exercised within systematic spatial operations. While there are many insightful studies of migrant domestic labour and informal occupation of urban spaces, the socio-spatial complexities of the FDHs' ritualised inhabitations in Central is presently under-researched.<sup>4</sup> While some discussion has occurred about the FDHs' public activities, most studies focus on cultural geography, the politics of representation and paradigms of power. There is a lack, however, of developed

studies into the political implications of the formation of an informal territory from the perspective of spatial design and spatial analysis.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the activation and exercise of citizenship through the FDHs' self-organised inhabitation of public space is also yet to be theorised.

This paper is organised into three sections. The first provides the context in which the FDHs operate, discussing the problems that are created by their employment contracts. From the outset, FDHs are marginalised and controlled within contractual confinements. The denial of citizenship and spatial ownership positions them within what political philosopher Giorgio Agamben calls a 'state of exception', where they are neither legitimate members of the community, nor transient foreigners.<sup>6</sup> I argue that such fundamental inequalities produce a collective motivation for the FDHs to assert their desire for freedom on their day off by appropriating and transforming public spaces in Central.

Using ethnographic data, the second section of this paper explores the FDHs' ritualised weekly inhabitation of space in Central. Drawing upon this, the final section of the paper analyses the socio-political and cultural implications of these practices. Such spatial occupations demonstrate the FDHs' agency and agility, shifting them beyond the stereotype of domestic labourers as 'docile migrants'. Their actions in public are, to some extent, empowering, and their community thrives within this mutable spatial zone, somewhere between the private and public sphere.

## A MATTER OF CITIZENSHIP, SPACE AND LABOUR

The majority of FDHs in Hong Kong are Southeast Asian women who are employed by Hong Kong families of average to high incomes. Such women enter the city under two-year FDH Visas, which stipulate a live-in requirement, a minimum allowable wage and one rest day each week.<sup>7</sup> FDHs are responsible for all domestic duties, including care for children and the elderly. This labour pattern began in the 1970s, with a steady stream of temporary migrants from the Philippines. As Hong Kong's

economy progressed, domestic labour continued to be imported, thus FDHs indirectly supported the local economy. Despite the sustained importance of their role, FDHs remain one of the most marginalised occupational groups in Hong Kong. Their identity, status and occupancy in the domestic and public realm are continuously contested.

For example, their government-stipulated employment contract necessitates that FDHs live in their employer's home, yet it does not require them to be provided a private bedroom. The contract reflects empathy towards the employer (appreciating the spatial limitations of Hong Kong housing). The contract merely states that the FDH be provided with 'suitable accommodation with reasonable privacy'.<sup>8</sup> It does not express concern for any lack of privacy for the FDH that may result from these terms. The allowance of spatial privacy as a negotiable term gives flexibility to the employer, and the FDH's privacy becomes a slippery and vague concept. As a result, the FDHs become passive subjects of labour within the spatial and power hierarchy of the domestic interior:

In many cases, the FDH's sleeping arrangement takes the form of a mattress on the floor, in the child's bedroom.<sup>9</sup> The FDH's separation from 'work' is limited to time spent in the bathroom and spatially bound to the mattress they sleep upon. Their belongings are in suitcases that remain hidden from sight for the majority of their stay. For six days each week, FDHs are 'spaceless' subjects that only exist within the domestic tasks they complete and ongoing duties. Their occupancy in the domestic interior is constant yet transitory. Consequently, on Sunday they are motivated to emerge from the interior to enact a particular kind of domestic freedom. This form of freedom is exercised collectively outside their contractual confinement, and it resists accepted norms of social behaviour in public space.

In March 2013 the Hong Kong High Court delivered a final ruling that denied a Filipino FDH eligibility to apply for Hong Kong citizenship, despite having lived in the region for seventeen years. This was a landmark case: according to Hong Kong immigration laws, any foreign person who has lived in Hong Kong continuously

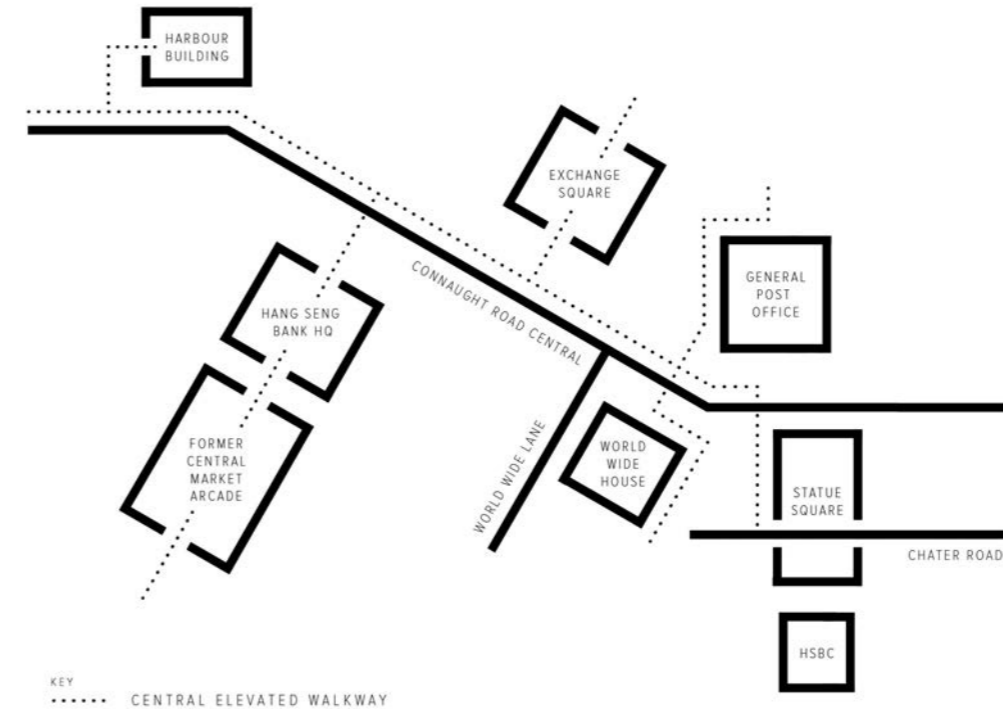
for over seven years is eligible to apply for permanent residency.<sup>10</sup> This denial of eligibility has direct impact on the FDHs; it contradicts the permanency of their role and their deeply entrenched presence in Hong Kong society.

The majority of FDHs I interviewed had been living in Hong Kong for over six years, and were on their third or fourth visa. The 2013 court ruling was not only a rejection of the FDHs' possibility of permanent residency, it was also a symbolic refusal of their personhood, delegitimising their integration into the socio-political and cultural fabric of Hong Kong. It renders them permanently 'spaceless', indeterminate residents trapped within other people's domestic interiors. It also places them within a state of exception, separating them from other foreigners living in Hong Kong, reflecting a degree of socio-economic prejudice and xenophobia.

In *The State of Exception*, Agamben describes the concept of indeterminacy as being neither external nor internal to the legal order. He notes that it concerns a threshold or a 'zone of indifference' where the internal and external do not exclude each other but rather blur together.<sup>11</sup> The FDHs reside within this abstract 'zone of indifference' where they are not isolated from society but are an exception to the norm. They are admitted into the intimate, domestic, private sphere of Hong Kong (communicating only in English or Cantonese) but will never be accepted as legitimate community members. They do not receive welfare benefits from the Hong Kong government, nor do they contribute in taxes.<sup>12</sup> These conditions place them in a precarious position.

Significantly, the FDHs' weekly assemblies in public space are tolerated by Hong Kong's law-and-order authorities. In other words, the police turn a blind eye on Sundays. According to the Hong Kong Public Order Ordinance, any groups that consist of fifty or more members must gain permission from the local police station to assemble in public space.<sup>13</sup> From my observations and interviews conducted with various FDHs, policemen and security guards in Central, no assembly permit had been sought nor granted, and figures of authority remain present but passive. On Sundays, therefore, the state of exception in which FDHs operate extends from the domestic interior into the public exterior. As they collectively occupy public spaces on Sunday, FDHs clearly appropriate and boldly augment the spaces – without official permission – into exclusive, albeit provisional, territories. Unlike buskers and other transitory urban occupants, FDHs exert temporary *ownership* over these public spaces.

The typologies of public space occupied by FDHs can also be paralleled with Agamben's state of exception, as they are intermediate, suspended zones between the interior and exterior: '[T]he state of exception represents the inclusion and capture of a space that is neither outside nor inside (the space that corresponds to the annulled and suspended form).<sup>14</sup> Underpasses, elevated walkways, pedestrian tunnels and disused arcades are neither open streets nor regularly inhabitable interiors; rather, they are conduits or pit-stops that are activated only by frequent, yet transient flows from one place to another. They are also examples of liminal urban spaces, or what anthropologist Marc



Augé describes as 'non-space', as they produce nothing, merely acting as spaces of passage and consumption.<sup>15</sup> No other group in Hong Kong inhabits these spaces in such a dedicated and collective fashion. Every Sunday, the FDHs peacefully resist the laws and norms of public behaviour to cultivate a unique ecology within a society that excludes them.

## CONTENTION AND NEGOTIATION: LITTLE MANILA

Fieldwork conducted in Hong Kong between 2012 and 2015 resulted in a collection of photographs, interview transcripts, sketches and spatial analysis. Together, these sources demonstrate how these acts of informal occupation are not simply of a repeated 'ethnic spectacle', rather, they are acts that express freedom and assert a sense of citizenship in a site of contention and flux.

At first glance, Central (or Little Manila), might appear a predictable site of resistance, where each week migrant labourers express themselves outside of their helper status and disrupt the established spatial order. My interviews indicate that Hong Kong citizens tend to perceive the weekly gatherings as disruptive. Some voiced concerns about a lack of cleanliness,

and fears about tarnishing the prestigious reputation of the financial district. These comments reflect a degree of prejudice and point to the socio-cultural tensions that underlie the weekly event, marking Central as a site of contention. Through conversations with FDHs, however, I have come to discover that Central is more than a contested site. It has become a temporary domesticated 'home' that produces its own culture for Filipino FDHs.

The conception of home constantly evolves across new social and cultural settings, particularly for migrants.<sup>16</sup> Home can be an expression of identity, of personalities, and the bedrock of cultural integrity and citizenship.<sup>17</sup> For six days each week, home becomes an abstract concept that is rarely realised for FDHs. Every Sunday, these compressed freedoms, personalities and needs are released, expanded and performed outside the domestic interior in full vigour.

I will now move to describe and analyse the makeup of this Sunday 'home', by focusing on the different programs that are facilitated by specific urban interior and exterior spaces in Central. The spatial network reveals the complexity of a public domestic realm, and beyond that, an informal territory of an otherwise precarious labour force.

Above  
Figure 2: Map of key sites of Little Manila.  
Original digital image: Evelyn Kwok and Blake Jurmann, 2015.

### SITE ONE: WORLD WIDE HOUSE

WorldWide Plaza is a corporate building located on Connaught Road Central. Situated within the first three levels of the building is the World Wide House, which has an entrance on the second level connected to the CEW. The retailers within the mall are mostly Filipino vendors, selling Filipino food and magazines, and providing banking and telecommunication services. Every Sunday, Filipino FDHs saturate the ground level, above-ground entrances and staircases in and around the building. Consequently, these interstitial spaces become a series of temporary waiting areas and meeting grounds.

### SITE TWO: WORLD WIDE LANE

Next to World Wide House is World Wide Lane, a narrow pedestrian laneway. Every Sunday this lane acts as an extension to the meeting and waiting grounds of World Wide House. It houses a Filipino fast food store and a convenience store with long queues stretching out onto the footpath.

On the corner of World Wide Lane and Des Voeux Road Central, a Filipino telecommunication shop holds karaoke competitions at its shop front. The event is hosted by a charming Filipino man who addresses the crowd in Tagalog and English, attracting a sizeable audience of Filipino women (and tourists). The audience gathers in front of the store, extending onto the footpath and into the atrium of World Wide House. This space is shared with an underground entrance to the Central MTR station.

On a Sunday in January 2015, security guards from the station instructed the crowd to disperse and not inconvenience the MTR passengers. Despite the repeated instructions over megaphones, the crowd ignored the requests and continued to cheer at the karaoke performances. One FDH said that if the security guards wished to evacuate them from the area, they would have to shut the shop or get the police involved. She added that they would merely continue their actions elsewhere. Amid the applause, she said, 'This is karaoke. It is loud and fun. Today is Sunday. This is also our space today.'<sup>18</sup>



### SITE THREE: CONNAUGHT ROAD CENTRAL

Every Sunday, approximately thirty metres of Connaught Road Central is cut off from traffic, becoming a loading zone for 'care packages', bound for the Philippines. For most of the day, the surrounding pedestrian footpath is occupied by groups of Filipino FDHs, organising large parcels. These are filled with toothpaste, shampoo, washing powder and sometimes clothing. Jeanette, a Filipino FDH in her late thirties, explained that many FDHs send personal care products back home to ease their families' expenses.<sup>19</sup> Each month Jeanette uses the remainder of her wage after remittance to purchase items for her family. She stores them in her room until she has enough items to fill a large parcel. Jeanette said that she feels fortunate about her work situation, as she has her own room in her employer's house. Other FDHs, who do not have the space for storage, will save their money until they can afford to buy the items in bulk, packing and sending the parcel on the same day. This sequence of events – purchasing, packing, sealing, writing address labels and loading – can take an entire day, starting early in the morning. Pedestrians accessing the Central MTR station, the CEW and surrounding shopping complexes negotiate their way through this small section of Connaught Road Central, which becomes a seemingly chaotic Filipino postal exchange every Sunday.



**Opposite**  
Figure 3: Filipino FDHs transform the pedestrian underpass on Connaught Road Central into their exclusive postal exchange on a Sunday. Photograph: Evelyn Kwok, 2015.

**Above**  
Figure 4: The surrounding pedestrian footpath of Connaught Road Central becomes a temporary storage area for the informal postal exchange on a Sunday. Photograph: Evelyn Kwok, 2015.

## SITE FOUR: CENTRAL ELEVATED WALKWAYS (CEW)

The first conduit of the CEW was built between the Mandarin Oriental Hotel and the second level of a shopping complex within the Prince's Building in 1965. It was designed as a pedestrian connection between the two buildings but consequently affected the rent value of the retail spaces within. In direct contrast to the usual conventions of retail rental, suddenly the value of the mall's second level units was more than those on the ground level. This opened a new logic of real estate value, but more significantly, it sparked a phenomenon that shifted the way people moved around the city. Over the last four decades many commercial buildings in Central (and beyond) were designed to include an air-space connection. Entrances and exits of buildings began to proliferate above the ground floor, hence creating a labyrinthine network of elevated walkways between buildings, which allowed pedestrian flow via many apertures simultaneously.



Every Sunday, hundreds of temporary cardboard units appear on the CEW, resembling a village of odd public-private spaces. In some cases, these units occupy both sides of the walkway, shifting pedestrian thoroughfare to the middle. Within these makeshift units, FDHs gather to eat, chat, sleep, groom and engage in regular domestic activities as they otherwise would have within the comfort of their own private homes, if their homes were independent from their employers'.



Cardboard boxes are the main materials used for the construction of the units. The majority of them are erected on sections of the CEW in front of and surrounding Exchange Square, IFC Mall, Hang Seng Bank headquarters, Harbour Building and Central Pier. Some of the units are elaborately constructed, with entrances, floors, walls and even roofs, protecting the occupants from external weather and pedestrian traffic. The cardboard floors and walls are reinforced with packing tape and cable ties, while string or rope is used to reinforce vertical rigidity of the walls by connecting the edges of the cardboard to balustrades on the elevated walkways. Plastic sheets are draped over and hover above the interior of some of the units, and umbrellas reinforce the roofs on rainy days. These temporary domestic spaces vary in scale; some accommodate groups of four to five, while others can be occupied by up to twenty people.

The construction of temporary cardboard units is not exclusive to the CEW. They proliferate in surrounding public spaces in Central, such as the pedestrian footpaths near the General Post Office, the pedestrian tunnel connected to Chater Road and the ground floor atrium of the HSBC building. In order to obtain disused cardboard, FDHs in Central participate in an informal economy that has emerged as a result of their informal occupation. They purchase cardboard

**Opposite**  
Figure 5: The village of temporary cardboard units that appears on the CEW at Exchange Square on a Sunday. Photograph: Evelyn Kwok, 2013.

**Above**  
Figures 6 and 7: Cardboard units located on the CEW varying in sizes and construction techniques. Photograph: Evelyn Kwok, 2013.



pieces from a couple of enterprising Hong Kong locals, who deliver cardboard boxes to designated areas every Sunday. These illegal distributors have knowledge of each group's regular spaces and how many cardboard pieces are required. Each piece of cardboard is charged at HKD\$2. The cardboard is delivered early in the morning, when payment is exchanged. The distributors return in the evening to pick up the cardboard pieces again. The cardboard boxes once transported commercial goods to the retailers in Central. Discarded from the formal economy, such boxes are reincarnated as commodity to be consumed. In turn, the boxes engender privacy for one of



the lowest socio-economic sectors of Hong Kong. This weekly informal economy embodies a striking reversal of supply and demand between Hong Kong and the FDHs.

Although the temporary domestic territory is situated within the urban chaos of Central, it provides a sense of comfort and refuge from the FDHs' weekly labour routine. In these public-private zones, they have the freedom to speak their own language, to share experiences and enjoy food reminiscent of home. Above all, the FDHs can regain a sense of privacy, control and autonomy over their bodies and domestic space, albeit for one day each week. Lisa Law, a geographer whose research draws on postcolonial and feminist theory, suggests 'Little Manila is where domestic workers recover from more subtle forms of sensory reculturation that occur in Chinese homes, and in the process they create new ways of engaging with city life. It is also a place where Filipino women express a creative subjective capacity with the potential to displace hegemonic images that describe their lives and work – if only for a week.'<sup>20</sup> Every Sunday, the urban interior and exterior spaces of Central are augmented into temporary domesticised places where the FDHs can obtain a sense of belonging.

**Opposite**  
Figure 8: Cardboard collectors retrieving cardboard on Chater Road as FDHs disperse on a Sunday evening. Photograph: Evelyn Kwok, 2015.

**Above**  
Figure 9: Umbrellas used as dividers between the FDHs and the pedestrians in the former Central Market Arcade (part of the CEW) on a Sunday. Photograph: Evelyn Kwok, 2015

## AGENCY IN APPROPRIATED SPACES

The process of labour migration is often not a smooth transition for migrant domestic workers. Sociologist Rhacel Salazar Parrenas describes the four key dislocations that Filipino migrant domestic workers face in global migration: partial citizenship, contradictory class mobility, the pain of family separation and non-belonging.<sup>21</sup> Cultural theorist Stuart Hall describes dislocations, or 'narratives of displacement', as the conjunctures or specific positionings of subjects in social processes.<sup>22</sup> Parrenas identifies the four dislocations experienced by Filipino migrant domestic labourers through the analysis of migratory processes, the social settings for the subjection of individuals and the structural formation of migrant domestic labour within globalisation.<sup>23</sup>

As we have seen, FDHs in Hong Kong dwell in a precarious spatial situation. Sociocultural anthropologist Nicole Constable focuses on the commodification of intimacy, gender and reproductive labour. In *Maid to Order in Hong Kong*, she claims that the migrant workers participate in their own oppression by disciplining themselves to secure their employment contract.<sup>24</sup> Self-discipline involves changes made to their appearance and their behaviour. These changes include: wearing plain clothing, cutting their hair short, wearing no make-up, emphasising their subordinate status by addressing family members as 'sir' or 'madam' and obligingly responding to all requests.<sup>25</sup> This is not the circumstance for all FDHs, as some employers formalise rules that the FDH must comply with.

I interviewed Christine, a FDH in her early thirties. She recalled a list that was given to her when she met her employer five years ago.<sup>26</sup> It included a detailed description of how she should speak, dress and act, and it even dictated the allowable time spent in the bathroom. Her employer became more relaxed as Christine settled in, however she continues to comply with the rules. Reflecting on the interviews conducted with FDHs during my fieldwork, it is apparent that through various gestures, big or small, FDHs want to portray themselves as 'good workers' and unwittingly allow themselves to be subordinated by their employers. FDHs are therefore vulnerable, and, according to Constable, they become 'disciplined migrants, docile workers'.<sup>27</sup>

Embedded with global dislocations and localised oppression, FDHs assert themselves repeatedly, *en masse*, into the urban landscape of Hong Kong. They continue to struggle for their 'right to the city', recalling Henri Lefebvre's polemical 1967 text.<sup>28</sup> This right – he asserted – was both a cry from the withering crisis of everyday life in the city and a demand for the recognition of this crisis and the urgent need for alternative urban engagement that is less alienated and more meaningful.<sup>29</sup> This of course, as Lefebvre himself knew, was a perpetual pursuit of unknown encounters. Geographer David Harvey discusses the right to the city within contemporary contexts of urbanisation, claiming that such a 'right' no longer exists. The right to the city is an empty signifier with contingent meanings – appropriated both by the wealthy and powerful, as well as the homeless and 'san-papiers'.<sup>30</sup>

In effect, the FDHs in Hong Kong are endlessly pursuing their right to the city. They are struggling for their right on two fronts: a right to the city through spatial residency, and a right to social inclusion. Every Sunday, the Filipino FDHs materialise their struggle through the creative acts of appropriation and transformation of public spaces in Central. In doing so, they are repeatedly generating a collective agency to resist and rupture hegemony.

Collective agency is also evident through public acts of political activism, in the form of political rallies and protests, which take over Chater Road in Central (Figure 2). Chater Road is a street that houses numerous flagship stores of high-end international fashion designers. When the road is closed to vehicular traffic every Sunday, it becomes the designated site for FDHs' political demonstrations. A variety of protests take place, motivated by incidents of violation or injustice, such as the aforementioned court ruling, which saw over 10,000 people gather on Chater Road.<sup>31</sup>



Above  
Figure 10: Chater Road transforms as hundreds of FDHs gather to participate in choreographed dancing as part of the 'One Billion Rising' campaign on a Sunday in 2015. Photograph: Evelyn Kwok, 2015.

## CONCLUSION

What can we learn from the FDHs' temporary transformation of public space? Through creative appropriation and transformation of interstitial urban interior and exterior spaces, this marginalised contingent has generated new spaces that transgress the formal and commercial boundaries of the city. Using their bodies and vernacular resources (such as society's 'wastage' cardboard), these temporary transformations of public space demonstrate a subtle yet specific form of agency in the public realm. Beyond the circumstantial oppressions that are practised in the homes of the employers, FDHs, as a collective, exist beyond the stereotype of docile subjects of domestic labour. Every Sunday Little Manila acts as circuit-break in Central's dedicated program of consumption, which, while temporarily disruptive, does not destroy the mechanism of economic flows.

While this paper discusses the specific agency of Filipino FDHs in Hong Kong, it is worth noting that FDHs of other ethnic backgrounds are also appearing in Hong Kong's public spaces, exercising their freedom in creative ways. In Causeway Bay, Indonesian FDHs are pushing the boundaries of public and commercial space. Large roundabouts, underpasses and even the staged domestic interiors of Swedish furniture showroom IKEA are being creatively appropriated.

What is unique about the Filipino FDHs' agency is the creative adaptation of public space, which forms a socio-spatial ecology. What might first appear an odd assortment of spaces, objects and activities in the urban interiority of Central is in fact a systematic construction of informal domesticised spaces, routinised activities, organised settlements and an informal economy. As such, these temporary spaces are fundamentally a political phenomenon and an exercise of citizenship that produces a collective culture of solidarity and resistance. The existence of the informal territory in Central is reflective of, and part of, the cultural politics of global labour migration and socio-spatial inequality. This example also demonstrates the capacity of Filipino FDHs to dwell within a mutable spatial zone, somewhere between the private and public sphere. By spatially and legally tolerating these ritualised

inhabitations of public space, Hong Kong incorporates a curious flexibility in its urban regulations. It shows how elasticity may be embedded into the governance of public spaces, whereby the system allows for multiple communities to co-exist – albeit in tension – without breaking.<sup>32</sup> This ecological description of the city proposes an alternative relationship to citizenship in the public realm. Instead of reading the city as a singular system that propels development and economic growth, an elastic, agile and transformational ecology has evolved, with the capacity to incorporate communities of difference in the multi-temporal and multi-spatial contemporary city.

## NOTES

1. As of September 30, 2013, there are 319,325 Foreign Domestic Helpers in Hong Kong. Amnesty International, *Exploited For Profit, Failed By Governments: Indonesian Migrant Domestic Workers Trafficked to Hong Kong*, 2013, 7. Website: <http://www.amnesty.org/fr/library/asset/ASA17/029/2013/en/d35a06be-7cd9-48a1-8ae1-49346c62ebd8/asa170292013en.pdf> (accessed June 28, 2014).
2. Jasmine Susanna Tillu, "Spatial Empowerment: the appropriation of public spaces by Filipina domestic helpers in Hong Kong," (masters thesis, MIT, 2011).
3. University of Technology Sydney, ethics approval #HREC 2013000252.
4. Rhacel Salazar Parrenas, *Servants of Globalisation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001); Nicole Constable, *Maid to Order in Hong Kong: Stories of Migrant Workers* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2007); Ligaya Lindio-McGovern, *Globalization, Labour Export and Resistance: A Study of Filipina Migrant Domestic Workers in Global Cities* (London: Routledge, 2011); Jeff Hou, *Insurgent Public Space: Guerrilla Urbanism and the Remaking of Contemporary Cities* (New York: Routledge, 2010); Jeff Hou, *Transcultural Cities: Border-Crossing and Placemaking* (London: Routledge, 2013); Ron Shiffman et al., *Beyond Zuccotti Park: Freedom of Assembly and the Occupation of Public Space* (California: New Village Press, 2012).
5. Lisa Law, "Home Cooking: Filipino women and geographies of the senses in Hong Kong," *Cultural Geographies*, no.8 (2001): 264-283; Galvin Chia, "Focusing the Familiar? Locating the Foreign Domestic Worker in Postcolonial Hong Kong Discourse," *Cross-sections: The Bruce Hall Academic Journal VIII* (2012): 1-18; Janet Ng, *Paradigm City: Space, Culture and Capitalism in Hong Kong* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2009).
6. Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 23.
7. The minimum allowable wage of FDHs is HKD\$4050 (approximately USD\$510) each month. HKSAR Immigration Department, *Employment of Foreign Domestic Helpers*, [http://www.immd.gov.hk/eng/services/visas/foreign\\_domestic\\_](http://www.immd.gov.hk/eng/services/visas/foreign_domestic_helpers.html)

[helpers.html](http://www.immd.gov.hk/eng/forms/forms/id407.html) (accessed January 4, 2015).

8. HKSAR Immigration Department, *Employment Contract for Foreign Domestic Helpers Recruited from Outside Hong Kong*, <http://www.immd.gov.hk/eng/forms/forms/id407.html> (accessed March 2, 2015).
9. Renate Wohrer, "No Room of One's Own," in *Exchange Square*, ed. Moira Zoitl (Berlin: Jovis Verlag, 2008), 50-57.
10. This legislation did not explicitly include or exclude FDHs, however since being contested in 2013, it has been amended to exclude any foreign persons living in Hong Kong under the FDH Visa.
11. Agamben, *State of Exception*, 23.
12. In 2003, the Employee Retraining Levy was introduced where approximately \$9600 HKD was paid to the government by the employer for every two-year FDH Visa applied for. This levy resulted in many employers taking portions out of the FDH's wages to contribute to the levy. This levy was suspended in 2008 and permanently removed in 2013. HKSAR Immigration Department, *Employment of Foreign Domestic Helpers*, [http://www.immd.gov.hk/eng/services/visas/foreign\\_domestic\\_helpers.html](http://www.immd.gov.hk/eng/services/visas/foreign_domestic_helpers.html) (accessed January 6, 2015).
13. HKSAR Department of Justice, *Public Order Ordinance*, Chapter 245, [http://www.legislation.gov.hk/blis\\_pdf.nsf/4f0db701c6c25d4a4825755c00352e35/14B03C325D4C1827482575EE0052311E/\\$FILE/CAP\\_245\\_e\\_b5.pdf](http://www.legislation.gov.hk/blis_pdf.nsf/4f0db701c6c25d4a4825755c00352e35/14B03C325D4C1827482575EE0052311E/$FILE/CAP_245_e_b5.pdf) (accessed January 7, 2015).
14. Agamben, *State of Exception*, 35.
15. Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (London: Verso, 1995).
16. Liz Kenyon, "A home from home: student's transitional experience of home," in *Ideal Homes? Social Change and Domestic Life*, ed. Tony Chapman & Jenny Hockey (New York: Routledge, 1999) 84-95.
17. *Ibid.*, 84.
18. Andrea (requested the exclusion of her surname), interview by author; Hong Kong, February 1, 2015.
19. Jeanette (requested the exclusion of her surname), interview by author; Hong Kong, February 8, 2015.
20. Law, "Home Cooking: Filipino women and geographies of the senses in Hong Kong," 266.
21. Parrenas, *Servants of Globalisation*, 23.
22. Stuart Hall, "Ethnicity: Identity and Difference," in *Radical America* 23, no.4 (1992): 9-20.
23. The commodification of reproductive labour is a global phenomenon that extends beyond the situation of FDHs in Hong Kong. It involves an interdisciplinary examination of sociology, economics and gender studies that is beyond the scope of this paper.
24. Constable, *Maid to Order in Hong Kong*, 15-17.
25. *Ibid.*, 181-198.
26. Christine (requested the exclusion of her surname), interview by author; Hong Kong, February 1, 2015.
27. Constable, *Maid to Order in Hong Kong*, 15-17.
28. Henri Lefebvre, *Le Droit à la Ville*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Anthropos, 1968).
29. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1991).

Smith (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1991).

30. David Harvey, *Rebel Cities* (New York: Verso, 2012), 15.
31. Smaller yet consistent rallies and campaigns continue to take place, protesting against sustained problems such as the unrestricted working hours, the two-week rule and illegal agency fees. HKSAR Labour Department, *Practical Guide for Employment of Foreign Domestic Helpers*, <http://www.labour.gov.hk/eng/public/wcp/FDHguide.pdf> (accessed August 18, 2014).
32. Sam Spurr and Evelyn Kwok, "Skywalking in Hong Kong: Disrupting flows in the consumerist wonderland," *Lusofona Journal of Architecture and Education* [Online], 0.8-9 (2013): 387-406, <http://revistas.ulusofona.pt/index.php/revlae/article/view/4244/2896>