

emergent solitude: unplanned interiority in hong kong's public spaces

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abstract

In Hong Kong's densely populated urban environments, domestic spaces often fail to meet residents' need for privacy and solitude, leading to an increase in the individuated use of public open spaces. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in the city's public housing estates and sitting-out areas, this essay demonstrates how individuals actively appropriate these spaces to carve out moments of solitude, thus subverting their prescribed functions. It explores how the relational affordances that were initially designed for social interaction adapt to accommodate isolated behaviours, effectively transforming them into unplanned urban interiors. And it highlights tensions between utilitarian urban planning and the fluid, adaptive needs of residents.

By conceptualising public spaces as unplanned interiors, this essay challenges the traditional distinctions between public and private, social and solitary. It shows how interiority is a crucial aspect of Hong Kong's urban ecosystem, and proposes a relational understanding of these urban spaces that acknowledges their function in compensating for domestic inadequacies. Further, it enhances our understanding of solitude as a collective social action that should be acknowledged in the spatial design of densely populated urban environments. And it advocates for public space design as a third space that relationally considers the cultural and spatial dynamics between domestic and work spaces.

keywords

interiority; solitude; public space; Hong Kong; unplanned interior

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introduction

Living in Hong Kong is a unique experience. In my university dormitory, I was assigned a tiny, cramped shared bedroom, with only a narrow aisle, barely an arm's length across, separating my bed from my roommate's. With thin partition walls and a bathroom shared with eight other students, the noise and presence of others feel constant. Stepping outside, the city presents an overwhelming intensity: hurried, bustling streets, densely packed pedestrian flows, vibrant and disorderly shop signage, frequent yelling, and an intense sense of being watched through countless windows. Between the compressed domestic interior and the overstimulating public exterior, one asks where, in such a city, can one experience solitude?

As someone who craves solitude, I began seeking places and situations where I could find them. When I ventured outside, I noticed others practising solitude. Under the shade of a tree next to a residential building, a man was enjoying a takeaway meal; nearby, an older man was slowly exercising with his eyes closed. At one end of a bench sat a young girl wearing headphones and watching anime on her phone, while at the other end, a foreign domestic helper was making a TikTok video, a leashed dog resting beside her leg. A young student sat by a flower bed with his legs crossed, playing a mobile game, and a construction worker napped on a chair against the wall. These practices of solitude took place in a tiny space next to a public housing building, frequently traversed by other residents. The individuals I saw did not interact with each other.

I walked into the space and sat down among them. No-one looked up. In that moment, I slipped out of the busy pedestrian flow and fast-paced urban bustle. The relentless urban tempo softened into a distant hum in the background. I began to focus on myself, just like the others around me. Within this small pocket of public space, the other solitary individuals had collectively created an atmosphere of ease. It was not a silence born of emptiness, but one nurtured through mutual non-interference: a shared

yet individual experience that rendered the space calm without requiring enclosure. Here, solitude was not the absence of others but the presence of a gentle spatial agreement to enjoy solitude together.

This observed inversion of spatial expectations provoked critical reflection, leading me to re-evaluate Eurocentric assumptions about solitude. These assumptions tend to conceptualise solitude as a form of withdrawal from society, rooted in the modern experience of the individual within the metropolis, as described by Georg Simmel and later by Norbert Elias in his account of the civilising process.¹ Moreover, solitude has been spatially idealised as a condition enabled by privacy and physical enclosure, exemplified in Henry David Thoreau's retreat to Walden Pond and Gaston Bachelard's poetics of the intimate house interior.² However, having resided in less dense cities in divergent cultural contexts, I had internalised the notion that solitude was best sought within a private, enclosed space, often my bedroom. I had conceptually framed public spaces as sites for interaction, gathering, and social connection.³ In Hong Kong, however, this paradigm seemed to be subverted. Here, the scarcity of autonomous private rooms, compounded by space compression, room sharing, and acoustic-visual permeability, renders domestic interiors inadequate for solitude. Public space is reconstituted as a collective repository for solitary practice. Individuals carve out ephemeral experiences and zones of interiority in open yet private ways.

The city's extreme density and domestic constraints generate a unique social-spatial network, encouraging an unprecedented demand for solitude and leading me to view urban public space anew, through the lens of unmet solitary needs. Public spaces globally prioritise sociability, and Hong Kong is no exception. Yet my observations revealed that solitude-seeking behaviours are a dominant yet overlooked practice.⁴ Crucially, citizens autonomously adapt urban environments through tactical appropriation, carving out unplanned interiority by repurposing socially programmed public spaces for solitary

use. This occurs despite formidable constraints, including spatial compression, hypervisibility under institutional surveillance, and managerial regimes that restrict prolonged occupancy.

As the architectural theorist Charles Rice argues, spatial-political relations are emergent co-constructions, neither predetermined nor static but continually reconfigured through practice.⁵ In Hong Kong's public spaces, the self-organised adaptations of solitude-seekers embody such citizen-led spatial negotiations. Their tactical reclamations of benches, ledges, and marginal zones constitute what the scholar Michel de Certeau might term 'tactics,' quiet claims to bodily autonomy within managerial urban regimes.⁶

Emergent solitary practices cannot be reduced to individual acts of resistance. The desire for solitude in public spaces forms an ecology of affordances within Hong Kong's cultural and urban life. Affordance theory, originating in James J. Gibson's framework of ecological psychology, examines the action potentials perceived by agents within their environments.⁷ Early applications focused on functional interactions between users and discrete physical features.⁸ In particular, Donald A. Norman, a researcher and vice-president of Apple Computer Co., prioritised these interactions in his user-centred design framework. However, contemporary urban scholarship contests this legacy. Some critics, for instance, argue that early approaches were reductive, flattening cities' socio-spatial complexity and neglecting how affordances are dynamically (re) negotiated through culturally embedded practices, power relations, and temporal contingencies.⁹

To move beyond a simplified deterministic view of the urban environment, this essay adopts a relational socio-spatial perspective that recognises solitary practices as produced through the entanglement of social practices, spatial configurations, and everyday negotiations. This approach draws from the relational framework recently proposed by Quentin Stevens, Jonathan Daly, and Kim Dovey

that integrates assemblage thinking, actor-network theory, and affordance theory.¹⁰ According to this framework, affordances do not arise solely from human intentions or material properties. Instead, they emerge through fluid and situated networks of interaction between human and non-human actants: cultural norms, institutional policies, environmental conditions, and other human beings collectively shaping the emergence of practices.

From this relational socio-spatial perspective, we conducted in-depth ethnographic studies of Hong Kong sites popular for solitude. We aimed to answer two intertwined questions: What relational conditions enable solitude to emerge in public spaces in Hong Kong? And how do these solitude practices co-construct unplanned interiority within this urban context?

solitude and relational affordances

Solitude is often considered both a physical and a psychological condition, typically defined by withdrawal from social contact. However, its meanings and forms are diverse. The psychology researcher Reed W. Larson defines solitude as an objective cybernetic separation, a state in which the immediate exchange of information and affect is interrupted or suspended, whether physically or virtually.¹¹ In psychology, this is often associated with seclusion and a reduction in social stimuli. Yet scholars increasingly recognise that physical isolation is not always necessary for the experience of solitude. The psychology researchers Christopher R. Long and James R. Averill demonstrate that individuals can enter a state of solitude even when others are physically nearby, as long as no direct social interaction occurs.¹² The psychologist Robert J. Coplan and colleagues similarly distinguish between solitude as a state of mind and as a state of being, suggesting that spatial disconnection is less critical than attentional and affective withdrawal.¹³

Building on these distinctions, the psychology researcher Thuy-vy T. Nguyen and co-authors introduce the terms 'public solitude' and 'private

solitude' to differentiate between being alone in the presence of others and being physically isolated, respectively.¹⁴ While the latter is often described as 'real solitude,' involving intentional separation from all social interaction, public solitude allows for a more complex negotiation of space, attention, and behaviour.¹⁵ It is a form of public solitude that most frequently emerges in urban contexts, where individuals tactically withdraw within shared spaces.

Understanding solitude as a spatially negotiated and socially embedded phenomenon provides a foundation for examining how it emerges within Hong Kong's dense urban fabric. The average living space per person in Hong Kong is approximately 16 square metres, with many households consisting of three or more members sharing a compact unit.¹⁶ Staying at home often means being cramped and restricted, with little visual or acoustic privacy from other family members. This unideal interior situation of limited privacy may strengthen the desire for solitude as an opportunity to enjoy oneself. In such a context, solitude cannot be accommodated within private interiors. Instead, it takes shape as a spatial event, distributed across public environments amid urban crowdedness. Being alone in an exclusively segregated environment and achieving 'private solitude' or 'real solitude' is therefore rare in Hong Kong's urban context. However, the limitations imposed by space and crowding have fostered another mode of solitude: a shared condition in which people tactically disengage from each other while remaining physically close. The presence of others is not necessarily a threat to solitude. Rather, it can offer a sense of safety and orientation. Jane Jacobs famously argues that 'eyes on the street' provide informal surveillance and social order in urban life.¹⁷ In the context of Hong Kong, these eyes are not only watching for safety but also participating in a tacit agreement of mutual restraint.

To understand the emergence of such solitary practices, we engage with the relational framework of affordances proposed by Stevens, Daly, and Dovey.¹⁸ In this framework, affordances arise not

solely from physical form or individual intent but from networks of interaction among bodies, materials, infrastructures, norms, and cultural expectations. From this perspective, affordances that co-construct the desire for solitude are effects of socio-spatial assemblages. These assemblages refer to dynamic configurations of human and non-human elements through which spatial meanings and practices are continuously negotiated.

This relational affordance framework is especially useful for understanding solitude in public spaces. Benches or ledges, for instance, are not typically designed for solitary use. Yet they become capable of supporting solitary behaviour when they are partly shaded, located at the edges of circulation spaces. In Hong Kong, relational affordances are further complexified by being highly dependent on people's desires for autonomy, usage patterns, and social and atmospheric conditions. Stevens and others classify affordances into four types: enabling, constraining, improvised, and serendipitous.¹⁹ Solitude in the public urban spaces examined below often emerges through the latter two types of affordances, improved and serendipitous, whereby individuals creatively repurpose space in ways that differ from the original design intentions.

the hong kong context

Public spaces in Hong Kong are predominantly designed with a functionalist focus that emphasises social interaction. *Hong Kong Planning Standards and Guidelines* (HKPSG) is a government manual that outlines standards and regulations for land use and facilities.²⁰ Chapter 4 of HKPSG requires open spaces in Hong Kong to support both 'active' and 'passive' recreational activities. It explains the term 'recreation' with reference to home and indoor entertainment, such as mahjong and watching television, as well as outdoor activities, including practising tai-chi and participating in competitive sports. Depending on location and size, open spaces are categorised into regional (at least 5 hectares), district (at least 1 hectare), and local open spaces (at least 500 square metres in

urban areas).²¹ In densely populated residential urban areas, local open spaces are more common and take the form of small playgrounds, sitting-out areas, and open spaces in public housing estates.²² They often accommodate passive recreational activities for local residents, workers, passers-by, and sightseers.²³ According to the Open Space Opinion Survey, 56 per cent of open space visitors often visit and use small playgrounds, sitting-out areas, and open spaces in public housing estates on their own.²⁴ These public spaces often mediate between domestic and work environments, and play a crucial role for individuals living in Hong Kong's high-density urbanism. In this respect, they operate very much like sociologist Ray Oldenburg's concept of 'third places,' which describes places other than home (first place) and work (second place).²⁵



Figure 01.
Solitary people gathered in the Portland Street Rest Garden. Photograph:
Shan Yue, 2025.

Seating arrangements in these open spaces often face each other or open onto communal areas: sun shelters provide shade for three-seater benches, and sitting-out areas are integrated into pedestrian networks to encourage intergenerational and multicultural interaction. These design intentions reflect normative assumptions about what constitutes proper publicness: visibility, interaction, and shared activity. As such, solitude does not feature prominently in the programmed uses of these public spaces. In 2021, for instance, a

renovated version of one of these public spaces was opened to the public.²⁶ A huge pink table was placed in the centre, with the intention of 'encouraging user interaction.'²⁷ However, people entering the space often sit alone with no interaction, their backs turned to the table [Fig. 01].

It is within this divergence that we can observe the emergence of what might be understood as unplanned interiority: a condition in which the public realm takes on the affective and spatial qualities of interior space, not through architectural design but through people's adaptation. These moments are neither enclosed nor permanent nor clearly defined. Instead, they are ephemeral, created through bodily positioning, spatial marginality, and atmospheric restraint. In such spaces, individuals find temporary refuge from the overstimulating demands of urban public life, crafting unplanned interior-like experiences within exterior settings.

The design researcher Liz Teston conceptualises public interiority as a condition of the senses, where interior experience emerges not from physical enclosure but from affective, perceptual, and behavioural cues.²⁸ Such sensory thresholds are embodied in the ways Hong Kong residents claim moments of solitude in open spaces through psychological withdrawal, atmospheric attunement, and bodily orientation. These include turning one's back to pedestrian flow, sitting on the edge of a bench, and using plants and flowerbeds or architectural edges as temporary boundaries. Rather than isolating themselves through physical segregation, people create a sense of interiority through attentional reorientation and micro-spatial positioning. They produce what Liz Teston calls 'porous thresholds,' as a performative boundary negotiated through bodily syntax.²⁹

Suzie Attiwill further challenges the notion of interiority as an individualised, psychological retreat.³⁰ Instead, she frames it as a process of collective individuation, shaped through the interrelation of social and environmental ecologies.

This perspective supports this analysis to move beyond a focus on individual, subjective perspective and designer–user–object relationships. Instead, it focuses on the relational socio-spatial dimension that enables the conceptualisation of affordances, practices, and experiences as the emergent products of fluid, socio-material networks involving norms, desires, infrastructures, and everyday practices.³¹

Thus, investigating the emergence of solitude in Hong Kong's public spaces through relational socio-spatial affordance is not only a question of user behaviour or design performance. It is a way of tracing how spatial agency is distributed across socio-spatial assemblages, how sensory thresholds are generated, and how interiority emerges as a situated, ecological event within public space.

emergent solitude in hong kong public spaces

Fieldwork was conducted between September 2023 and March 2025. A mixed-methods approach was employed, involving quantitative observations, qualitative ethnographic interviews, participant observations, and spatial analysis. The study was authorised by the research ethics departmental committee of the first author's affiliated institution.³² All the participants signed an informed consent form for the on-site interviews. Only data from interviews to which the participants had given their consent are presented in this essay, and all data are presented anonymously. Two investigators of different genders participated in the fieldwork, including the first author. The two investigators had different cultural backgrounds and differed in their understanding of and preferences regarding solitude. They received training in and practised the investigative methods before conducting the fieldwork.

In the Open Space Opinion Survey, Yuen Long, Sham Shui Po, Kowloon City, and Kwai Tsing reported the most solitary public space visitors of all Hong Kong districts. The difference between the proportion of solitary visitors and those who visited public spaces

with others was largest in Sham Shui Po, Kowloon City, and Kwai Tsing. Therefore, we conducted screening and systematic observation in these three districts. Based on previous research results, we selected four public spaces of two types.³³ The first comprised small sitting-out areas: the Fat Kwong Street Sitting-out Area and the Ma Tau Road/To Kwa Wan Road Garden in Kowloon City District. The second type comprised open spaces in public housing estates: Pak Tin Estate in Sham Shui Po and Cheung On Estate in Kwai Tsing.

At each of the four sites, we conducted further observations, anthropological interviews, and spatial analysis. These were a series of sequential actions in which we observed different behaviours at the sites, determined how these behaviours related to the space, and examined the social connections between people. During this process, photos, videos, behavioural maps, and field notes were produced. We tried to minimise our impact on other actants in the public space. When we observed that a solitary person planned to get up and end their solitary time, we approached them, politely introduced ourselves, and invited them to take part in an interview. The purpose of this was to respect the solitary experience to the greatest extent possible. After an interview had been conducted and the interviewee had left, the two investigators took the position the interviewee had occupied. Using their bodies as a tool for empathy, they recorded and reflected on the factors and relationships that had influenced the interview content.

case studies — public housing estates

Pak Tin Estate is a public housing estate in Hong Kong, located in Shek Kip Mei, Sham Shui Po District [Fig. 02]. It was put into use in 1975 and has undergone numerous renovations and rebuilds since 1980. Pak Tin Estate accommodates over 8100 households, with a population of more than 23,300 residents. Individual unit areas range between 12.09 and 52.28 square metres. It is expected to accommodate more than 10,000 flats

upon completion of the reconstruction in 2027.³⁴ Public housing estates, such as Pak Tin Estate, are located throughout Hong Kong, aiming to ease the housing crisis and offer low-income residents affordable rental housing. Nevertheless, families with permanent resident status in Hong Kong who want to live in such estates must wait until a vacancy arises. As of the end of March 2025, the average waiting time for a unit was 5.3 years.³⁵ The location, environment, age of the estate, and floor level of vacant public housing estates are assigned randomly. Applicants are generally not allowed to specify their preferences.



Figure 02. Residents sitting alone in a public space in Pak Tin Estate. Photograph: Xia Bi, 2023.

In a public space located between Tai Tin House and Lai Tin House, we met interviewee #PTE20 (code name), a woman in her sixties residing in Pak Tin Estate. She was seated at one end of a three-seater bench, occupying only half the seat, leaning forward and slightly to the side as she quietly and intently ate a roasted sweet potato. 'I just can't get along with my daughter-in-law and my granddaughter,' she said, clutching a full bag of fresh vegetables and other groceries.³⁶ She lived in a building at the far end of the estate, a considerable distance from where we met her. On her way home from buying ingredients for dinner, she had deliberately detoured to this spot to fill her stomach in advance. 'After cooking for them, I'll

come right back down here to exercise. I don't want to listen to their arguments. I want to be as far away from my block as possible. No one bothers me here, except for you,' she said, glancing at us with a smile as we took notes.³⁷ 'Of course, I enjoy spending time with friends, but I also like being alone and free from interruptions. Who would want to stay in the same place all the time? If I had more money, I'd travel abroad alone,' she said, sitting between three tall residential buildings with countless windows in an estate she had waited to live in for seven years.³⁸

After being allocated a public housing unit, families often decide to live together to reduce their living expenses. However, the cramped interior and crowded household environment can lead to subtle yet meaningful changes in family relationships and the atmosphere at home. For #PTE20, whom we met six months after moving into her new flat, the composition of her household, the surrounding neighbourhood, and the rhythms of daily life had all shifted. Yet her role had remained unchanged. As the housewife in the household, she continued to bear the responsibility for shopping and cooking. In this context, her desire to escape the uncomfortable domestic atmosphere, the estate itself, and the stagnation of her surroundings manifested as a fantasy of travelling abroad alone. Instead, as a small but meaningful act of resistance, she chose to sit alone on a bench in a public space, enjoying a sweet potato by herself, before returning home. She chose the bench at the farthest edge of the estate deliberately, to avoid being recognised by neighbours. Her awkward seated posture and the way she faced away from passers-by showed a quiet caution, spatial modesty as a tentative, improvised form of unplanned interiority. It also materialised what Teston terms 'porous thresholds' as performative boundaries that are continually shaped and redefined through bodily movements and spatial interactions.³⁹ This emerging interiority was not brought about by architectural enclosure or deliberate planning. Instead, it arose from a web of constraints and disconnections: the domestic obligations #PTE20 could not refuse, the social

roles she embodied, and her emotional need to carve out experience from a setting from which she otherwise felt alienated. In this moment, she constructed a temporary interior within the public environment as a condition not prescriptively planned but claimed through situated agency.



Figure 03.
In a corner of Cheung On Estate, wooden dining chairs are carefully stored outside a residential building. Photograph: Xia Bi, 2023.

A similar form of emergent solitude was observed in Cheung On Estate. Many individuals sitting or lingering alone in public spaces near the residential towers were dressed in home clothes and slippers, subtly blending the domestic with the public. Their attire, usually confined to indoor spaces, extended into the shared spaces downstairs, suggesting a gentle expansion of the domestic boundary. At the edge of the estate, we observed some elderly people sitting on wooden dining chairs brought from home [Fig. 03]. After use, the chairs were neatly stored away in a corner to protect them from the sun. For many residents, the open spaces surrounding the estate served as a spatial extension of cramped domestic interiors, offering an opportunity to carry domestic practices into a more open and ventilated environment.

small sitting-out areas

In Hong Kong, sitting-out areas are small public parks and green spaces designed for rest and passive recreation. Also known as rest gardens or pocket

gardens, they form the smallest units within the city's official open space network.⁴⁰ Scattered throughout densely built neighbourhoods, these modest spaces provide moments of respite from the city's intense pace. Despite their ubiquity, sitting-out areas are often overlooked in urban analysis due to their limited size, minimal programming, and sometimes temporary status. Nonetheless, they remain an essential yet understated part of Hong Kong's high-density urban landscape.

Ma Tau Wai Road/To Kwa Wan Road Garden is a relatively large sitting-out area located on the boundary between Hung Hom and To Kwa Wan. It occupies a triangular plot formed by the intersection of two major arterial roads. The D2 exit of the To Kwa Wan Mass Transit Railway (MTR) station is positioned at the northwestern edge of the site, and the surrounding area includes several busy bus interchanges. The garden itself is divided into three main zones. The southern section features a children's play area, while the eastern side is designated for activities for the elderly. A few two-seater benches with shelters surround these two areas. The central and northern zones, closer to the MTR exit and the public toilet, feature a series of orderly flowerbeds and three-seater benches arranged to form a resting area [Fig. 04]. Due to its proximity to multiple transport hubs, the garden naturally functions as a pathway for commuters. The continuous movement of people and the surrounding vehicular traffic bring a distinct sense of vitality and a fast-paced urban energy to this green space.

On a weekday evening, we encountered #MTG07, a man in his late thirties, sitting alone at one end of a three-seater bench. He was wearing noise-cancelling headphones and writing in a palm-sized notebook. A pair of boulder-climbing shoes hung from the backpack at his feet. 'I'm taking a seat here to slow down and get organised,' he said.⁴¹ Soft, calming music leaked faintly from the headphones around his neck. 'I like to take some alone time to clear out my thoughts from work, so they don't come with me and interfere with my life.'⁴² As the owner of two cafés, his

days were filled with a relentless stream of decisions about events, suppliers, and staffing. This moment of pause was a deliberate practice of detachment. 'The open sky helps me calm down,' he added.⁴³ 'Where I work and where I live are both surrounded by high-rises and, of course, the underground MTR. That's why this spot, with its wide open sky, is my favourite.'⁴⁴



Figure 04.

Resting area in Ma Tau Wai Road/To Kwa Wan Road Garden, beside the D2 exit of To Kwa Wan MTR station. Photograph: Xia Bi, 2023.

Kowloon City District has many clusters of ageing residential buildings, especially in To Kwa Wan. While we were speaking with #MTG07, a steady stream of commuters passed by. Many office workers exited the To Kwa Wan MTR station, walking briskly in different directions on their way home after work. The continuous roar of traffic from the surrounding arterial roads and the mechanical hum of ventilation shafts near the station exit created a persistent layer of background noise.

Despite the surrounding noise and constant pedestrian flow, #MTG07 described the environment as 'nice and comfortable.'⁴⁵ 'This place does not stress me out,' he said. 'People are minding their own business: walking, sitting, exercising. No one cares about the other. It's not like parks at night when I was in New York.'⁴⁶ As he spoke, a woman who had been sitting alone nearby seemed to notice we were conducting an interview. She stood up and quietly moved to a more distant bench.

In Hong Kong, the everyday experience of living in a densely populated environment has fostered a collective tolerance of the presence of strangers. People are always conscious of others, yet there is an unspoken rule of non-interference. This establishes a social norm whereby strangers stay in close proximity without invading each other's personal space or interfering with their affairs. In public spaces, boundaries between individuals are clearly defined and carefully maintained. This was evident in the case of #MTG07, whose over-ear noise-cancelling headphones not only helped him focus on 'thought organising' but also served as a visible sign of disengagement from potential interaction.⁴⁷ Spending time alone in this garden every weekday evening established a boundary between his working identity and his personal life. Sitting quietly, listening to calming music, and writing served as a ritualised transition. The others around him did not disturb him but rather contributed to a feeling of comfort. At the same time, his awareness of the presence of other people provided a sense of safety.

The emergence of solitude and unplanned interiority in this context can be understood as the effect of a relational socio-material affordance. This affordance is co-constructed in an ecology through various interconnected actants: the bustle of fast-paced urban work life; Hong Kong's deeply embedded social norm of maintaining distance; people's tacit mutual awareness and non-interference in public space; the presence of an open sky, which offers a sense of perceptual release; the site's physical proximity to a major transit hub; and, crucially, #MTG07's own effort to mark a boundary between the stressful thoughts of work and his personal life.

solitude, public space, and unplanned interiority

These case studies reveal that emergent solitude in Hong Kong's public spaces cannot be viewed as a simple retreat from society or attributed solely to spatial features or personal choice. Instead, it is formed through a situated negotiation of multiple intersecting forces: cultural norms of non-

interference, institutionalised housing constraints, sensory sensitivities, and the affective atmospheres of particular urban micro-sites. These acts of solitude develop not in isolation but through relational socio-material conditions that shape and limit how people occupy and interpret space.

In both housing estates and sitting-out areas, individuals create interiorised experiences through bodily orientation and minimal but meaningful interactions with public spaces. The woman in Pak Tin Estate (#PTE20) practised solitude as a form of resistance and self-preservation within a stressful domestic environment that constrained her autonomy. Her method of creating physical and emotional space became a spatial improvisation. Similarly, the café owner at To Kwa Wan Road/Ma Tau Wai Road Garden (#MTG07) ritualised daily transitions through ambient withdrawal. His solitude was not about avoiding others but about nurturing an ecosystem of shared silence and mutual distance. These examples demonstrate that unplanned interiority emerges when spatial practices extend beyond design intentions. The original design of Hong Kong's public spaces reflects a common view of publicness as visibility, sociability, and active participation. However, people tactically re-appropriate these spaces to create microzones of withdrawal, transforming public spaces into temporary interiors of resistance, transition, or recreation. These 'porous thresholds' are not fixed spatial types but delicate configurations sustained through atmospheric attunement and spatial modesty.⁴⁸ And they are co-created through attention, social conditions, and behavioural signals, such as turning away from pedestrian flow or wearing noise-cancelling headphones.

Revisiting Jacobs' 'eyes on the street' through this lens, what emerges is not only a mechanism of safety or surveillance but a condition that enables solitude.⁴⁹ The subtle awareness that others are nearby, while they carry on with their own affairs, creates an ambient social presence that allows individuals to retreat without fear. These eyes do

not intrude, but they do provide stability. Further, like Attiwill's framing of interiority as collective individuation, the solitary practices documented in these case studies appear both highly individual and collective.⁵⁰ They constitute a shared response to broader urban ecologies. These ecologies are influenced by high-density urban stress, everyday life, and overexposure. These acts do not reclaim space in the name of individual sovereignty but instead reinforce a subtle, communal ethos of pause. From this perspective, public solitude is not a way to escape city life but an active form of resistance.

The relational affordance framework clarifies how such interiority arises, not merely as qualities of space or behaviour but as effects of entanglements between both. Building on the relational account of Stevens and others, this framework conceives affordances as emergent from ongoing interactions among people, material conditions, and cultural norms, rather than as fixed properties of the environment. Affordances reflect not only what the environment presents to the individual but also what the individual, in relation to others and the context, co-constructs within the milieu. In this context, emergent solitude is a socially embedded, materially situated, and temporally dependent production.

conclusion

This essay shows how solitude emerges in Hong Kong's dense urban public spaces not as a static psychological state or a designed outcome but as a relational and context-specific spatial event. Based on observation, ethnographic interviews, and spatial analysis, it demonstrates how people tactically re-appropriate sitting-out areas and public spaces in public housing estates to construct unplanned interiors. These unplanned interiors represent conditions of resistance and respite that occur within the relational ecological environmental context.

Framing these practices through the lens of relational socio-spatial affordances allows for a more nuanced understanding of how solitude is

enabled and sustained. Informed by assemblage thinking and public interiority, this essay demonstrates that solitude emerges as a socio-material assemblage, a co-constructed condition of attentional detachment and sensorial calibration within relational ecologies. These practices, although subtle and often unnoticed, reflect spatial agency and emotional self-regulation in constrained environments. Public spaces are not only 'third places'; they also require consideration in a broader framework of contextual conditions, including the domestic (first place) and work (second place) environments.⁵¹

Ultimately, the findings call for a rethinking of how public space is understood, designed, and valued. Instead of concentrating solely on sociability, it recognises the need to acknowledge solitary practices that stem from withdrawal, pause, and reflection. And it demonstrates that solitude is not the opposite of urban life but an adaptive response to it.

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notes

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