

KOWLOON WALLED CITY, A SOCIAL URBAN ANALYSIS THROUGH PICTURES AND DRAWINGS

Author:

SOFÍA QUIROGA FERNÁNDEZ, GUILLERMO SÁNCHEZ SOTÉS

Affiliation:

XI'AN JIAOTONG-LIVERPOOL UNIVERSITY, CHINA

INTRODUCTION

The proposal analyses the space of Kowloon's walled city through photographs and drawings. The images by Ian Lambot and Greg Girard¹ and the illustrations by Kazumi Terasawa² demonstrate a chaotic urban configuration from a social and ethnographic perspective, emphasising the idea of community as a fundamental aspect in the development of this labyrinthine vertical slum narrative. Lambot and Girard, fascinated by this urban space, portray a place that, despite its shortcomings, manages to conceive the city as a mega-organic entity that adapts spatially and socially to the changing needs of users. The photographs collect the daily life of this place recording the actions of the inhabitants in direct relation to the urban configuration. Their work serves as both an urban and social document³ that facilitates understanding of the place. Additionally, Kazumi Terasawa's drawings reflect the disposition of private and public space. The illustrations depict the relationship between the living and working areas, showcasing the various activities developed within the tiny blocks comprising this unique city. The general depiction and the illustrated details demonstrate evidence of concepts related to high density and the dissolution of boundaries between public and private. The drawings provide a narrative that explores novel forms of use and occupation, guiding the viewer to discern the interplay between spatial performance and social life. By means of observation and analysis, both approaches explore the social and architectural aspects that provide insights and reflections on Kowloon's spatial development.

Kowloon Walled City

Hong Kong's missing Kowloon Walled City was a remarkable urban phenomenon built without the involvement of architects or significant government intervention. It was the most densely populated city in the world, housing over 35,000 residents within an area of less than one hectare. Ultimately demolished in 1994, the city had grown to accommodate a staggering population of 50,000. Situated in within the Kowloon district, this slum-like city block was an intricate spatial labyrinth comprising more than three hundred interconnected buildings spanning multiple levels (Figure 1).

The Walled City of Kowloon represents a unique planning failure involving three different governments -Chinese, Hong Kong, and British- at the administrative, territorial, and social levels. According to historians, China claimed the rights to this ancient military fortress after the Japanese invasion during the World War II.⁴ The construction of the city began under a provision within an 1842 treaty that granted China ownership rights over the site, despite Hong Kong having been under

British rule for decades. In order to avoid a diplomatic conflict, none of the governments took any action over the site, resulting in a legal limbo that rendered the city's existence technically illegal. With no legislation, planning, regulation or building standards, low rents, and no taxes requirements, the city not only persisted but thrived with minimal government oversight of essential services.



Figure 1. Ryuji Miyamoto Kowloon Walled City 1987.

Kowloon became home to many citizens who lived in a state of both legal and urban informality. These were mainly immigrants⁵ with few resources, illustrating the latent socio-spatial exclusion in contemporary cities,⁶ where certain groups face barriers to accessing formal housing and urban services. The limited space and the dense population motivated the development of high-rise buildings, many of them without natural light, ventilation, or running water due to the lack of health and safety guidelines for illegal constructions. Despite the initial potential of the city's architecture to foster anonymity and a lack of community identity, which have historically been associated with social disorganisation and criminal activity, the citizens successfully established a resilient social network that had a positive impact on the community. Throughout its history, the city experienced a unique urban phenomenon characterised by the coexistence of residential and commercial establishments, including factories, shops, brothels, and illegal businesses. This heterogeneous mix of activities reflected the resourcefulness and adaptability of the residents. Among these businesses were unlicensed dentists and doctors trained in China who could not afford the high licencing fees of legal establishments in Hong Kong.

Due to its urban settlement and its specific spatial configuration, the city was vulnerable to illegal activities and experienced sporadic criminal behaviour cycles interspersed with periods of relative peace. Its unique political and territorial position made it a prime location for Triad-controlled illegal activities (1950-60).⁷ However, in the 1970s, anti-corruption campaigns targeted the corrupt power structures that protected the Triads, leading to their weakening and a subsequent reduction in criminal activity. As a result, the brothels and opium dens moved in search of wealthier customers, leaving this self-reliant city relatively quiet and fostering a stronger sense of community.⁸

Exploring the city through pictures and drawings

Canadian photojournalist Greg Girard and British architect Ian Lambot captured the intricate spatial complexity of Kowloon through their photographic work while portraying it as a social system that functions as a community. Historically known as a place where crime and drugs coexisted alongside residents, Kowloon is presented by Girard and Lambert in a novel light that reveals the social dynamics within a chaotic and lawless environment. In addition, the Terasawa's research team elaborated a set of drawings as a research method to explore, and register the experience of living in the walled city. The drawings were characterised by a remarkable level of detail and accuracy. The researchers included students, architects, engineers, and urban planning specialists led by historian and anthropologist Hiroaki Kani. The team spent several years visiting and studying the city, collecting information about its layout, architecture, and inhabitants, capturing the complexity and chaos of the city, and depicting its labyrinthine alleyways, cramped living spaces, and bustling commercial activity. They devised a document mapping the multiple urban layers, interconnected circulations, dynamic uses, versatility of spaces, occupancy and spatial dynamics of residents, cultural values, and power dynamics that collectively shape the community (Figure 2). Through this process, the team was able to acknowledge patterns and insights that may not have been immediately apparent. By observing and recording the inhabitant's interaction in their contexts, as well as their living stories in the place, photographers and researchers uncovered unexpected social data based on their daily life, thus contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the city and community's dynamics.⁹ Both contribute graphically to our comprehension of Kowloon's urban life narratives,¹⁰ providing a glimpse into a now-vanished place and serving as a reminder of the power of art and storytelling to capture the essence of a particular time and place.

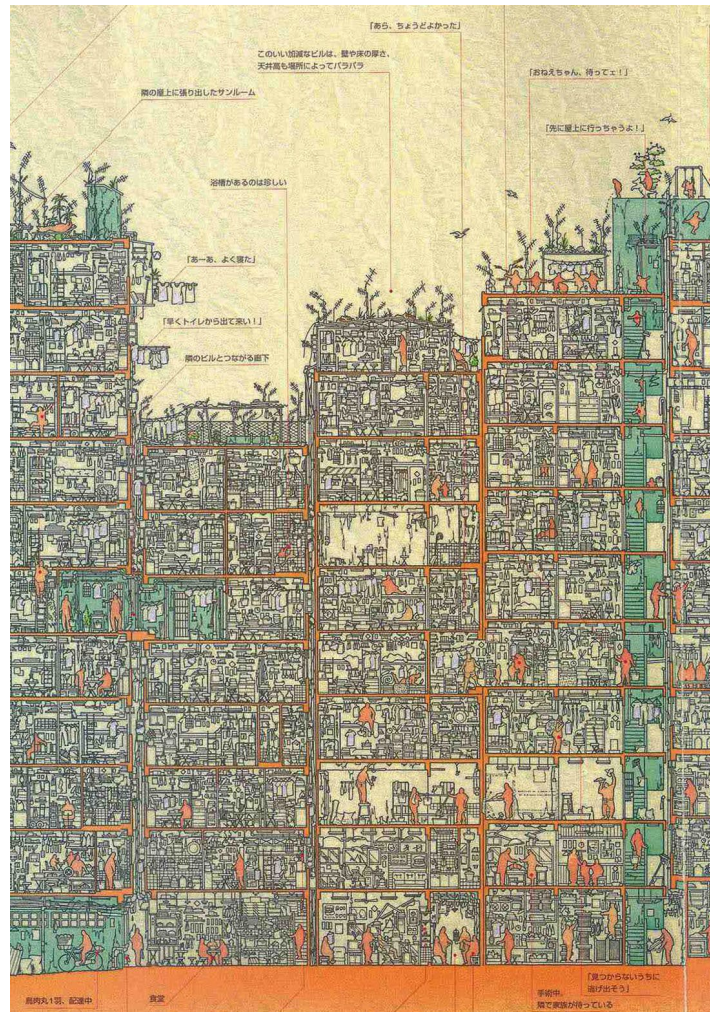


Figure 2. Terasawa, K. *Fragment of Grand Panorama of the Kowloon Walled City*.

THE URBAN SETTING, SPATIAL AND LIVING CONSIDERATIONS

Kowloon's development from 1946 to 1993 was largely unplanned and unregulated by architects or urban planners. The area started as a squatter camp within an abandoned military fort and eventually grew to become the most densely populated place on earth.¹¹ In terms of spatial configuration, Kowloon Walled City underwent various stages of evolution following the trend of Hong Kong's vertical growth. In the 1950s, construction predominantly utilised wood and stone, while mid-rise concrete apartment buildings were added during the 1960s. Towering blocks exceeding fourteen stories emerged during the 1970s. However, due to the proximity of the old Kai Tak International Airport, a height restriction was imposed, limiting the number of storeys to seventeen. As a result, an interconnected network of skyscrapers was gradually built, combining different blocks, and comprising narrow and chaotic structures that progressively increased in height and density. To optimise the allocation of private units within limited space, the construction of stair cores was undertaken to interconnect multiple blocks of buildings. This not only expanded the living area but also provided opportunities for social interaction between different blocks.¹² As the city expanded vertically, a secondary network of corridors was created on the higher floors, which, despite a lack of prior planning, facilitated circulation and access to the upper levels¹³ without requiring individuals to go downstairs to take the central staircase. This internal upper circulation was tailored to address the demands of high-density growth on the vertical axis. The residents of Kowloon Walled City devised

ingenious space solutions to deal with the challenges of living in a crowded and unregulated environment in which spaces were modified and restructured over time to accommodate their needs. The superblock evolved into an unplanned artificial city that informally housed all the necessary living services.



Figure 3. Greg Girard and Ian Lambot, in City of Darkness Revisited.

There was no centralised water supply or sewage system. As a result, the water quality was poor, and the residents had to rely on unregulated water sources. It was initially obtained by creating wells in and around the city. In the early years, the only way to get water was to go downstairs and carry buckets upstairs (Figure 3). However, with the introduction of electric pumps, the water was pumped up to tanks on the roofs through a complex system of pipes and connections, further constricting the circulation spaces between the various structures. After twenty years off, the government installed vertical pipes throughout the city, providing a more accessible and reliable source of drinking water for the population.

Electricity was an essential but precarious aspect of life in Kowloon Walled City. The city's residents relied on makeshift electrical wiring and often dangerous electrical connections that posed a serious risk of fires and electrocution. Due to the city's ungoverned status, there was no official electrical infrastructure. Instead, residents initially stole power from the general power grid, and company employees living within the city limits made the connections. However, the quality of electrical connections varied significantly, resulting in frequent power outages and electrical fires. Furthermore, due to the high population density and lack of space, electrical wires often cross over the city's narrow alleys, creating a hazard for residents and making difficult access to emergency services in case of fire or other emergencies. The illegal practice was eventually legalised in the late 1970s after a severe fire had devastated the city. Despite regular visits and recommendations from the Hong Kong Fire Brigade, fires continued to pose the most significant hazard in the city, particularly in the areas designated for commercial activities.

There was also a postal service where the postal carriers devised a system of signs and numbers to identify and locate specific addresses. This makeshift navigation system not only facilitated mail delivery but also served as a form of mapping within the city.



Figure 4. Greg Girard and Ian Lambot, in *City of Darkness Revisited*.

The residential units were characterized by their small size, limited spaces, and frequent instances of shared occupancy among multiple families. Nevertheless, despite their compact dimension, the residents' units were meticulously arranged and optimized to maximize efficiency. Many units were built within storage areas, and some even had mezzanine levels to create additional space. The lack of space led to the development of hybrid typologies not adapted to conventional urban classification or delimitation of use and privacy (Figure 4). The creative use of minimal spaces resulted in a blurring of the distinctions between housing units and corridors; the boundaries between indoor and outdoor, public and private, became indistinct and challenging to discern. For instance, the alleys of Kowloon were not only the pathways that connected the various buildings and dwellings, but they also served as social and cultural spaces that defined the community. Many alleys were lined with small shops, restaurants, and businesses that provided essential goods and services to the community. These businesses were often family-run and passed down from generation to generation, creating a sense of continuity and tradition within the community. Moreover, the alleys were the scene of numerous activities that further strengthened social ties and fostered a sense of belonging.

The decks were transformed into an informal public area for recreation and leisure activities. They were used for a variety of activities, such as playing games like mahjong,¹⁴ socialising with neighbours, and hanging laundry to dry. The rooftops were the most valuable asset and a social gathering place where children played and benefited from natural light and fresh air that was otherwise scarce in their homes (Figure 5). Among the upper-level residences, those occupying the top floor were deemed the most valuable and appreciated; some of them almost met the public housing standards of Hong Kong, except for their minimum dimensions. To increase the available surface of their homes, residents facing facades often added a small balcony. These balconies, usually full of plants and laundry, served as storage spaces and contributed to the vibrant and lively appearance of the building's façade. This strategy not only allowed occupants to expand their living spaces but also increased the visual dimensions of the building (Figure 6).



Figure 5. Greg Girard and Ian Lambot, in *City of Darkness Revisited*.



Figure 6. Greg Girard and Ian Lambot, in *City of Darkness Revisited*.

The affordable low rents in the Walled City led to the emergence of factories, shops, and businesses primarily on the ground and first floors, which were easily accessible. Residential units were thoroughly intertwined with non-domestic service units, making vague the limits between public and private. These businesses increased the risk of fires and contamination, worsening the city's sanitary conditions (Figure 7). Moreover, the city was active twenty-four hours a day; schools and services intermittently transformed into strip clubs and arcades by nightfall.¹⁵ This created hybrid typologies that directly correlated with economic and social factors, triggering new dynamics and perceptions of space. The flexibility of the spaces within the city reflected the resourcefulness and adaptability of the community.



Figure 7. Hong Kong's Kowloon Walled City, from the 1970s to demolition. *South China Morning Post*.

Despite the challenging living and sanitary conditions characterized by the lack of natural light and ventilation in most of the apartments and workplaces, as well as the precarious state of services and infrastructure, the Walled City serves as a paradigmatic example of flexible urbanism. Within this context, the diverse units exhibit the capability to accommodate a variety of uses, extending beyond traditional forms of user occupation. The adaptability and flexibility of the units generated an atypical activity program that operated independently from natural biorhythms,¹⁶ showcasing the city's complete detachment from such natural rhythms.

Due to the absence of government support and essential services, the community formed a tightly knit network where residents relied on each other to maintain decent standards of living conditions. The residents engaged in a network of relationships negotiated daily that operates as a multiplier of economic, cultural, and social capital. Paradoxically, the inadequacy of services that could have been perceived as a problem instead contributed to the development of a resilient community, highlighting the role of the physical environment as a factor in shaping social and cultural practices.¹⁷ The informality and flexibility of spaces were reflected in the social and cultural practices of the community, which were characterised by a high degree of autonomy and self-organisation. According to Lambot,¹⁸ a council of city 'elders', known as the Kai Fong,¹⁹ operated as the intermediary between residents and the authorities while also helping settle disputes within the city itself and registering ownership of the different properties. The Kowloon's citizens were characterised by a high degree of resilience, adaptability, and mutual support. The city functioned as an effective social and pragmatic network where all residents were willing to help each other in a wide range of areas, ranging from water and electrical supplies to social services, religion, and care for the elderly and the young. This bottom-up form of street sociability usually emerges in the unplanned spaces of the urban environment²⁰ to provide necessary services. The Kowloon Walled City was perhaps the closest approximation to a self-governing, self-sufficient, and self-determined modern city, characterised by a rudimentary yet urban fabric in which the community adapted and thrived despite the challenging environment.

CONCLUSION

The works of Lambot, Girard, and Terasawa offer valuable insights into the urban space of Kowloon from a social and ethnographic perspective. Their photographs and drawings capture the daily life, spatial dynamics, and community interactions within the complex urban environment of the city. These visual representations become powerful tools for interpreting and understanding the city's development and social phenomena.

Lambot and Girard were fascinated by the urban space of Kowloon. In their work, they described an area that, despite its shortcomings, understood the city as a mega-organic entity capable of adapting spatially and socially to the changing needs of its users. Their photographs document the daily life of this legendary place during its final years, providing an urban and social document that facilitates observation, analysis, and the recreation and understanding of a place that no longer exist. Their images go beyond simply registering architectural typologies and instead reflect the social relationships, cultural phenomena and performance that emerged within the city. The images reveal how the physical infrastructure shaped the social dynamics, showcasing the adaptation and improvisation of the residents in response to their spatial constraints. Similarly, the research conducted by the Japanese team, including Terasawa's meticulous drawings, offers detailed insights into the organisation and use of space within Kowloon. The drawings, alongside maps and other data collected by the researchers, provide a comprehensive understanding of the city's complex layers. The illustrations enable a deep exploration of the urban space and evoke a sense of place and authenticity. Bringing together the photographs and drawings, the analysis of Kowloon's urban space from a social and ethnographic perspective emphasizes the significance of community in its development. Both works shed light on the role of poverty, culture, exclusion, and group formation within the vertical labyrinthine of Kowloon. The study of the visual representations and collected data, provides a significant contribution to the field of urban studies, offering a more nuanced understanding of the intricate relationship between people and the built environment. By bridging the visible and the readable, these visual representation and research efforts provide a holistic understanding of Kowloon Walled City and its community, helping to fill in the necessary information to determine the city's history and significance.

NOTES

- ¹ Greg Girard and Ian Lambot, *City of Darkness revisited* (London: Watermark, 2014).
- ² Kazumi Terasawa and Kani Hiroaki *Grand Panorama of the Kowloon Walled City. Kowloon City Expedition: Photos and Statements* (Japan: Ed. Iwanami Shoten, 1997).
- ³ David MacDougall, "The Visual in Anthropology". In *Rethinking visual anthropology*, ed. Marcus Banks and Howard Morphy (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 276. Christopher Pinney, *Photography and Anthropology* (New Delhi, India: Oxford University Press, 2011), 14–15.
- ⁴ Lai W.C. Lawrence, Mark Hansley Chua, and Lua Hansley Chua. "The History of Planning for Kowloon City." *Planning Perspectives* 33, no.1 (2018): 97-98.
- ⁵ Kowloon Walled City was home to a diverse range of ethnic groups and nationalities, including Chinese, Vietnamese, and Nepalese, among others. This cultural diversity was reflected in the settlement's food, language, and religious practices.
- ⁶ Alfredo Mela and Alessia Toldo, *Socio-Spatial Inequalities in Contemporary Cities* (Gewerbstrasse: Springer, 2019), 4.
- ⁷ Paul Lee, dir., *The Law of Love: The Jackie Pullinger Story*, Documentary (United Kingdom: Chanel 4 Television Corporation, 1989).
- ⁸ David McMillan and David M. Chavis, sense of community definition: "Sense of community is a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group and a shared faith that members need will be met through their commitments to be together". In David McMillan and David M. Chavis, *Sense of community: An attempt at definition*. Unpublished manuscript, George Peabody College for Teachers, Nashville, TN (1976),9.
- ⁹ Sofia Quiroga Fernández, "Kowloon Walled City: The Social Vision of an Autoregulated Living Organism Based on the Analysis of T. Kazumi's Drawings, and G. Lambot and I. Girard's Pictures," in *International Proceedings UIA 2021 RIO: 27th World Congress of Architects, Rio de Janeiro, 22-25 March, vol1* (ACSA, 2021), 475.
- ¹⁰ The camera is used to record reality, while pictures demonstrate narrative purposes. See Douglas Harper, "Visual Sociology: Expanding Sociological Vision," *The American Sociologist* 19, no.1(1988): 54-70.
- ¹¹ Ian Lambot, "Self Build and Change: Kowloon Walled City, Hong Kong." *Architectural. Design* 87(2017): 124
- ¹² Usually, in vertical slums, the lack of space and infrastructure can limit the opportunities for social interaction, reducing the formation of social networks and social capital.
- ¹³ James Crawford, *Fallen Glory: The Lives and Deaths of History's Greatest Buildings* (New York: Picador, 2017), 393-417.
- ¹⁴ Mahjong is a traditional Chinese tile-based game that is played with four players. The game is typically played with a set of 136 tiles, which are divided into several categories, including suits, honour tiles, and bonus tiles.
- ¹⁵ Erich Tsang Shu-Ming, "Community Approach to Youth Work: Working Experience in Kowloon Walled City" (Master Thesis, The University of Hong Kong, 1979) 41.
- ¹⁶ Hugo Portisch, dir., *Kowloon Walled City*, documentary (Hong Kong: GMBH, 1988).
- ¹⁷ There is also an adaptation of "the physical environment to human-social needs." In Klaus Krippendorff, *A Dictionary of Cybernetics* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania, 1986) 1. "Adaptation can occur in several levels of organisation hierarchy". He further argues that the physical environment is not only shaped by human activity but also shapes human behaviour.
- ¹⁸ Lambot, "Self Build and Change: Kowloon Walled City, Hong Kong," 128.
- ¹⁹ The term "Kai Fong" comes from Cantonese and roughly translates to neighbourhood or community.
- ²⁰ Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961),270-290.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Agar, Michael H. *Speaking of Ethnography*. Beverly Hills (Calif.): Sage, 1986.
- Becker, Howard S., Gregory Bateson, Margaret Mead, et al. "The Uses of Photography." In *Exploring Society Photographically*, 33–68. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1967.
- Bourdieu, Pierre, and Marie-Claire Bourdieu. "The Peasant and Photography". *Ethnography* 5, no. 4 (2004): 601-616.

- Carney, John. "Kowloon Walled City: Life in the City of Darkness." *South China Morning Post*, March 16, 2013. <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/article/1191748/kowloon-walled-city-life-city-darkness>
- Chandler, Daniel. *Semiotics: The Basics*. London: Routledge, 2002.
- Crawford, James. *Fallen Glory: The Lives and Deaths of History's Greatest Buildings*. New York: Picador, 2017.
- Deenner, Andrew. "Neighbourhood Symbiosis." In *The Urban Ethnography*, edited by Mitchell Duneier, Philip Kasinitz, and Alexandra Murphy, 135–145. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Girard, Greg, and Ian Lambot. *City of Darkness Revisited*. London: Watermark, 2014.
- Harper, Douglas. "Visual Sociology: Expanding Sociological Vision." *The American Sociologist* 19, no.1(1988): 54–70.
- Jacobs, Jane. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. New York: Vintage Books, 1961.
- Krippendorff, Klaus. *A Dictionary of Cybernetics*. Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania, 1986.
- Lambot, Ian. "Self Build and Change: Kowloon Walled City, Hong Kong." *Architectural Design* 87(2017): 122–129. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ad.2225>
- Lawrence, W. C. Lai, Mark Hansley Chua, and Lua Hansley Chua. "The History of Planning for Kowloon City." *Planning Perspectives* 33, no.1 (2018): 97–112. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02665433.2017.1331751>
- Lee, Paul. Director. *The Law of Love: The Jackie Pullinger Story*. Documentary. United Kingdom: Chanel 4 Television Corporation, 1989.
- MacDougal, David. "The Visual in Anthropology". In *Rethinking visual anthropology*, edited by Marcus Banks and Howard Morphy, 276–295. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997.
- McMillan David and David M. Chavis, "Sense of Community: An Attempt at Definition." Unpublished manuscript, George Peabody College for Teachers. Nashville: TN, 1976. Accessed April 17, 2023. <https://www.drdauidmcmillan.com/sense-of-community/sense-of-community-a-definition-and-theory>
- Mela, Alfredo, and Alessia Toldo, *Socio-Spatial Inequalities in Contemporary Cities*. *Gewerbestrasse*: Springer, 2019
- Pink, Sarah. *Doing Visual Ethnography: Images, Media and Representation in Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2001.
- Pinney, Christopher. *Photography and Anthropology*. New Delhi, India: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Portisch, Hugo. Director. *Kowloon Walled City*. Documentary. Hong Kong: GMBH, 1988.
- Pullinger, Jackie. *Crack in the Wall: Life & Death in Kowloon Walled City*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1989.
- Quiroga Fernández, Sofía." Kowloon Walled City: The Social Vision of an Autoregulated Living Organism Based on the Analysis of T. Kazumi's Drawings, and G. Lambot and I. Girard's Pictures." *Vol. 1*. In *International Proceedings UIA 2021 RIO: 27th World Congress of Architects*, Rio de Janeiro, 22-25 March. 473-478. ACSA, 2021.
- Schwanhäußer, Anja. *Sensing the City: A Companion to Urban Anthropology*. Basel: Birkhauser, 2016.
- Terasawa, Kazumi, and Kani Hiroaki. *Grand Panorama of the Kowloon Walled City. Kowloon City Expedition: Photos and Statements*. Japan: Ed. Iwanami Shoten, 1997.
- Tsang Shu-ming, Erich. "Community Approach to Youth Work: Working Experience in Kowloon Walled City." Master's Thesis, The University of Hong Kong, 1979.