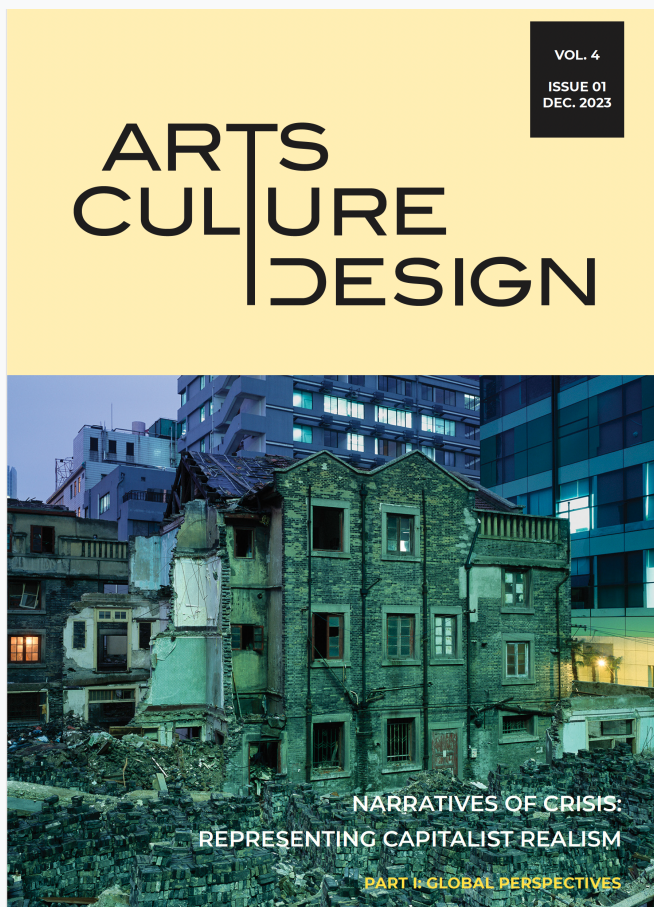


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### Portraits from Above

*Stefan Canham, Wu Rufina, Hercules Papaioannou*

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# PORTRAITS FROM ABOVE, HONG KONG'S ROOFTOP INFORMAL COMMUNITIES

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Independent

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urban landscape  
inequality  
Hong Kong

## ABSTRACT

Rufina Wu and Stefan Canham's series, "Portraits from Above, Hong Kong's Rooftop Informal Communities" (2007-2008), meticulously examines the overlooked urban phenomenon of unauthorized rooftop dwellings in Hong Kong's central districts. Focusing on the makeshift homes constructed by migrants in search of affordable housing, the series unveils a unique social and architectural history often unnoticed at street level. Through a comprehensive approach encompassing photographs, architectural drawings, and interviews, Wu and Canham unveil a world shaped by personal necessity and characterized by its ephemeral yet enduring nature. The series captures the juxtaposition of these informal settlements against the sleek skyscrapers, revealing the invisible slums within the heart of Hong Kong. The work provides a nuanced analytical perspective on the sociocultural pressures of the modern metropolis while highlighting the resilience of communities existing under the shadow of the law. Wu and Canham's documentation offers a tangible portrayal of real people navigating a world teetering between hope and despair.



**HERCULES PAPAIOANNOU** is a photography historian, chief curator at MOMus Museum of Photography, Thessaloniki.



**RUFINA WU** is an architect based in Vancouver, Canada.



**STEFAN CANHAM** is a photographer based in Hamburg, Germany. From December 2007 to February 2008, they were artists-in-residence at Hong Kong's Art and Culture Outreach, collaborating on *Portraits from Above – Hong Kong's Informal Rooftop Communities*. The project won the 5th International Bauhaus Award (Dessau, Germany 2008) and the WYNG Masters Award (Hong Kong 2013). It was published by Peperoni Books (Berlin 2008), MCCM Creations (Hong Kong 2009) and Parco Publishing (Tokyo 2014). *Portraits from Above* has been exhibited in galleries and museums in Europe, Asia, Oceania, and North America.

## PORTRAITS FROM ABOVE

The series "Portraits from Above, Hong Kong's Rooftop Informal Communities" (2007-2008) by Rufina Wu and Stefan Canham examines a unique urban feature of Hong Kong, a city that became a powerhouse of capitalism in Asia during British rule. Specifically, it showcases the phenomenon of spontaneous structures on the rooftops of buildings in Hong Kong's central districts, inhabited by migrants from China and other Southeast Asian countries. These individuals, in search of affordable housing in city centers where labor was in short supply, have spent the last half-century constructing unauthorized dwellings on the rooftops of high-rise, deteriorating buildings. These rooftops, where some people have lived for decades, have been built with the tacit approval of the state. Some of these structures are constructed from concrete and brick and come equipped with water, sewage, electricity, and amenities like internet connections. Others are makeshift shacks composed of sheet metal, wood, and rudimentary materials. Often, they form clusters with multiple walls, creating a juxtaposition of volumes and materials that adorn the summits of the buildings. Wu and Canham's comprehensive approach combines photographs that highlight the lodgings' position within the urban skyline, photographic views that depict their internal organization and daily life, and precise architectural drawings and floor plans that compare the original state of the buildings with their current rooftop condition, revealing the intricate arrangement of the roofs and their improvisational structure. Wu and Canham document an aspect of the city's social and architectural history that often goes unnoticed from street level. They have chosen five buildings that were part of an urban renewal project, entering twenty of these dwellings to create a documentary record that includes, in addition to the previously mentioned photographs and drawings, snippets of interviews with the occupants.

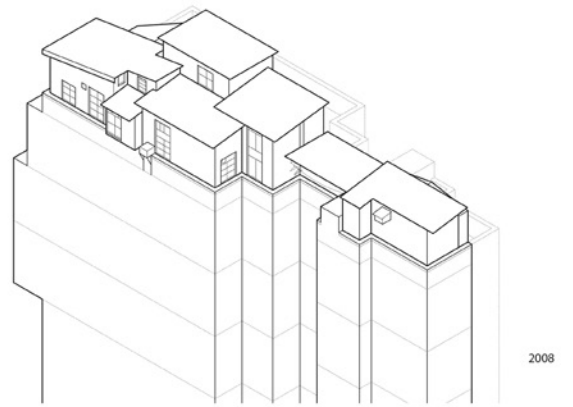
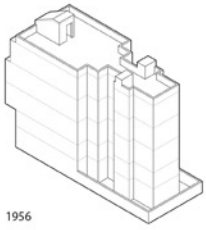
Their methodology provides an analytical perspective on these makeshift abodes, whose form is shaped by personal necessity. These small communities constitute an invisible slum in the heart of Hong Kong, marked by its ephemeral yet enduring nature. Wu and Canham's work profoundly encapsulates the social pressures exerted by the highly competitive environment of the modern metropolis. Simultaneously, it transcends

the boundaries of clinical or abstract description by showcasing the layers of this phenomenon, unraveling the stories of real people. Consequently, the elliptical narratives of the tenants bear witness to individual experiences; the photographs position each rooftop within the city's architectural panorama and serve as a vital source of information regarding the interiors of these rooms; the drawings sketch their historical development and deeper structure. From this composite document emerges an unknown world that teeters between hope and despair, constantly devising survival solutions while existing under the shadow of the law. It's a world characterized by handmade and improvised creations, in stark contrast to the sleek and elegant forms of the surrounding skyscrapers, which proudly pierce the sky (Chui 2010).

Rufina Wu (Hong Kong, 1980) focuses her interests on informal settlement practices in relation to rapid urban development and population mobility. Stefan Canham (England, 1968), who works in documentary photography and television productions, primarily concentrates on the use of public space, particularly marginalized communities and forms of self-housing. His photographic record of nomadic squatter culture in Germany, entitled "Bauwagen / Mobile Squatters," is a testament to this focus. The series "Portraits from Above: Hong Kong's Rooftop Informal Communities," in which they collaborated, was awarded the 3rd prize of the Bauhaus International Prize.

Wu and Canham invite viewers to immerse themselves in the urban jungle of Hong Kong, where they uncover makeshift shacks and shed light on the social condition of anonymous workers contributing to yet another economic miracle. Their work does not attempt to conceal the fact that, both historically and in contemporary terms, photography has been a central tool for 'de-territorialization.' It has played a role in training people to perceive land as a spectacle and a developmental opportunity, breaking the deep ties that once bound individuals to it, driven by the rapid pace of metropolitan development. Instead, their work seeks to demonstrate that in the digital age of intangible places, land and architectural space still remain vital focal points of fierce contestation, speculative exploitation, and political opportunism.

**Building 1 大廈 1**



**Figure 1:** Building 1, Sham Shui Po Area



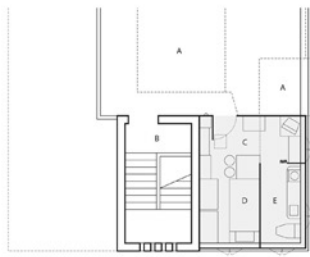
Figure 2: Building 1, Sham Shui Po Area

### Building 1

Dating from 1956, Building 1 is an example of Cantonese-style shophouses found primarily in Southeast Asia and southern China. Designed with the harsh tropical climate in mind, this building type is characterized by high ceilings to allow greater indoor air circulation, and verandahs to provide shade and shelter from rain. When built in rows along a street, the cantilevered upper storeys protect pedestrians from the elements. A number of Hong Kong's remaining shophouses, some dating back to the pre-war period, can be found in the Sham Shui Po district.

Only half of what was Building 1 remains – it has been severed by the new residential development on the adjacent lot. The remnants are simply waiting to be demolished. All the regular flats are empty, only the rooftop units and the ground floor hardware shop remain occupied. A single, unguarded staircase leads up to the roof of this 4+2 storey building. Five rooftop huts, ranging from one to two stories high, sit on 100m<sup>2</sup> of unconsumed roof area. Three rooftop households are documented.

1.1



- A Other Unit 其他住戶
- B Stair Core 樓梯
- C Meditation / Dining Area 冥想間 / 飯廳
- D Bunk Bed 床
- E Washroom / Kitchen 廁所 / 廚房

Interior Area 室內面積 : 12.3 m<sup>2</sup>  
 Exterior Area 室外面積 : N/A

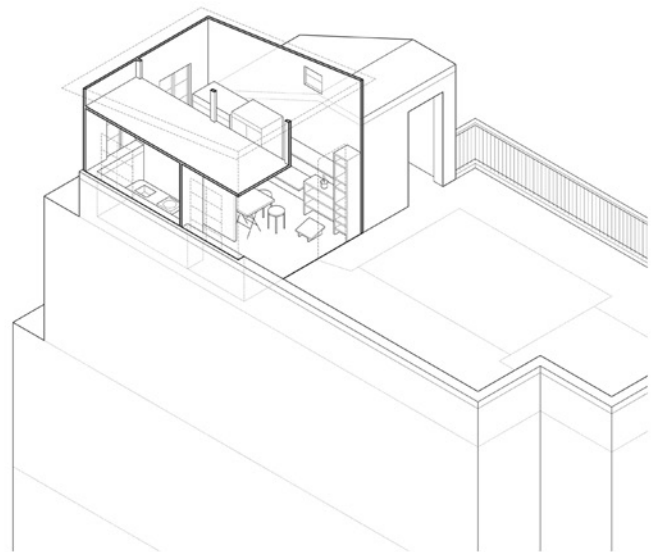
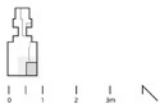


Figure 3: Building 1, Unit 1

**Building 1, Unit 1**

A native of Dongguan city in Guangdong province, he is a devout Taoist who follows a strict vegetarian diet and prays every morning and evening. Since his retirement, his wife's HK\$6,000/month job in Tai Kok Tsui is the primary source of income for the family. The rent for this unit is very cheap because his relative is the owner, but his family will not be able to live here for very long. In fact, all the regular flats in this building have already been adorned with signs declaring them properties of Hong Kong's Urban Renewal Authority. Relocation is inevitable, but he intends to stay on this rooftop until the government provides a satisfactory flat in a nearby area. The transportation costs associated with living in a peripheral satellite town would be too burdensome for his family to shoulder.

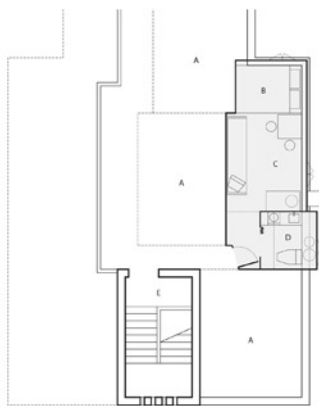


Figure 4: Building 1, Unit 1



Figure 5: Building 1, Unit 1

1.2



- A Other Unit 其他住戶
- B Bed 床
- C Living / Dining Area 起居室 / 餐廳
- D Washroom / Kitchen 廁所 / 廚房
- E Stair Case 樓梯

Interior Area 室內面積 : 14.5 m<sup>2</sup>  
 Exterior Area 室外面積 : N/A

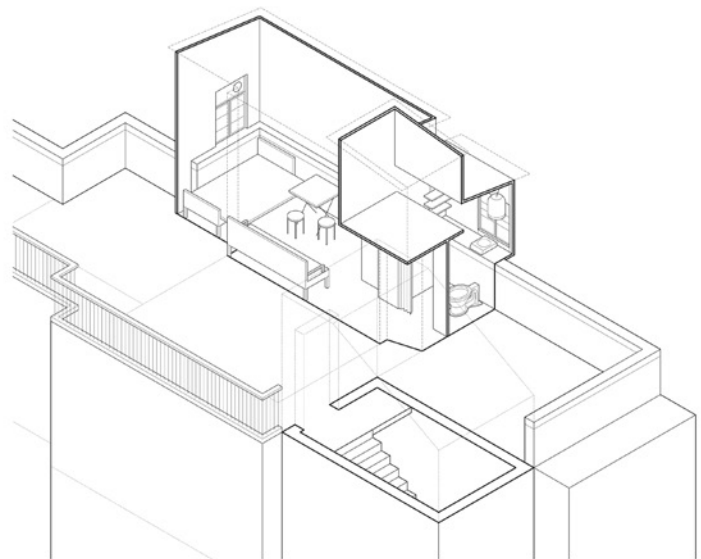


Figure 6: Building 1, Unit 2



Figure 7: Building 1, Unit 2

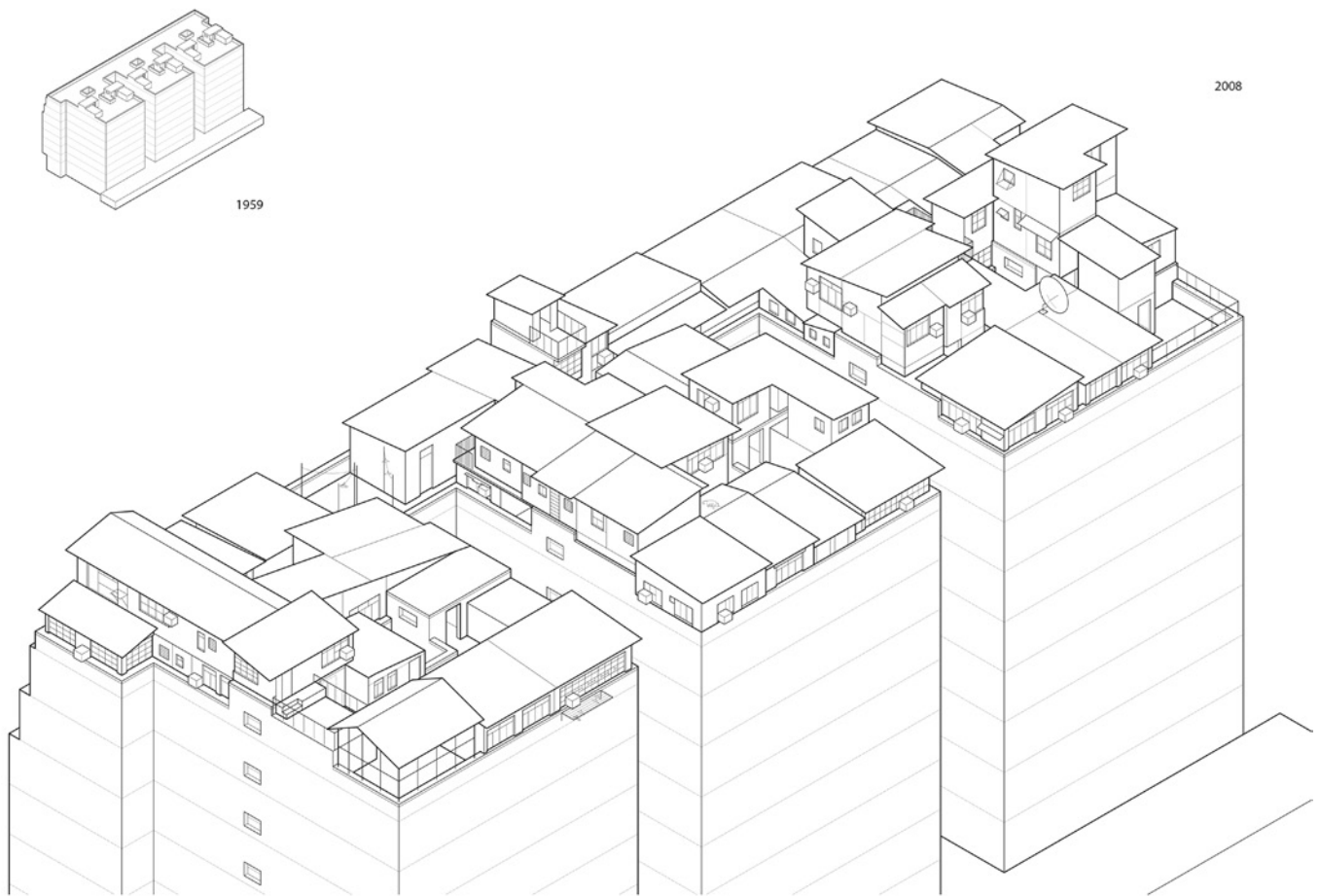




Figure 8: Building 1, Unit 2

**Building 1, Unit 2**

A 58-year-old security guard and his wife live in this rooftop unit with two birds. He also claims to timeshare his bed with uninvited rodent guests. He is a Hong Kong local. His wife came from Enping City in Guangdong province about two years ago. As a newcomer, she has little choice but to take on menial jobs like dishwashing. He left his 3-year-old son under his sister-in-law's care because he believes Enping, with more space and cleaner air, is a better environment for his child to grow up in. Before moving to this HK\$1,200/month unit, he lived in a HK\$1,000/month regular flat on the ninth floor of a nearby tenement building. He decided to move to his current address when stair climbing became too taxing. During the summer months, the electricity bill amounts to HK\$900/month because of the constant need for air conditioning.

**Building 5 大廈 5****Figure 9:** Building 5, Tai Kok Tsui Area**Building 5**

Building 5 is a mixed-use structure located in the Tai Kok Tsui neighbourhood, an area within the Yau Tsim Mong district in the Kowloon Peninsula. The area began with the development of shipyards and other heavy industries, but since the 1980s, many of the factories have relocated elsewhere. Like Sham Shui Po and Kwun Tong, this area is a redevelopment site targeted by the URA and is expected to undergo major transformations.

Comprised of three housing blocks, Building 5 has a continuous roof area of 1145m<sup>2</sup>. Six unguarded staircases provide access to the roof of this 8+3 storey building. The incremental growth of rooftop habitats since 1962 resulted in a complex spatial configuration of more than thirty-five domestic units. The self-built huts, ranging from one to three storeys high, are linked by a maze-like system of corridors and stairs. Often treated as extensions to the residents' homes, these narrow pathways offer an impressive display of everyday life. Eleven households are documented.

**Figure 10:** Building 5, Tai Kok Tsui Area

Building 5 大廈5



Figure 11: Building 5, Tai Kok Tsui Area, Informal Skyline



Figure 12: Building 5, Tai Kok Tsui Area



Figure 13: Building 5, Tai Kok Tsui Area

## 5.5

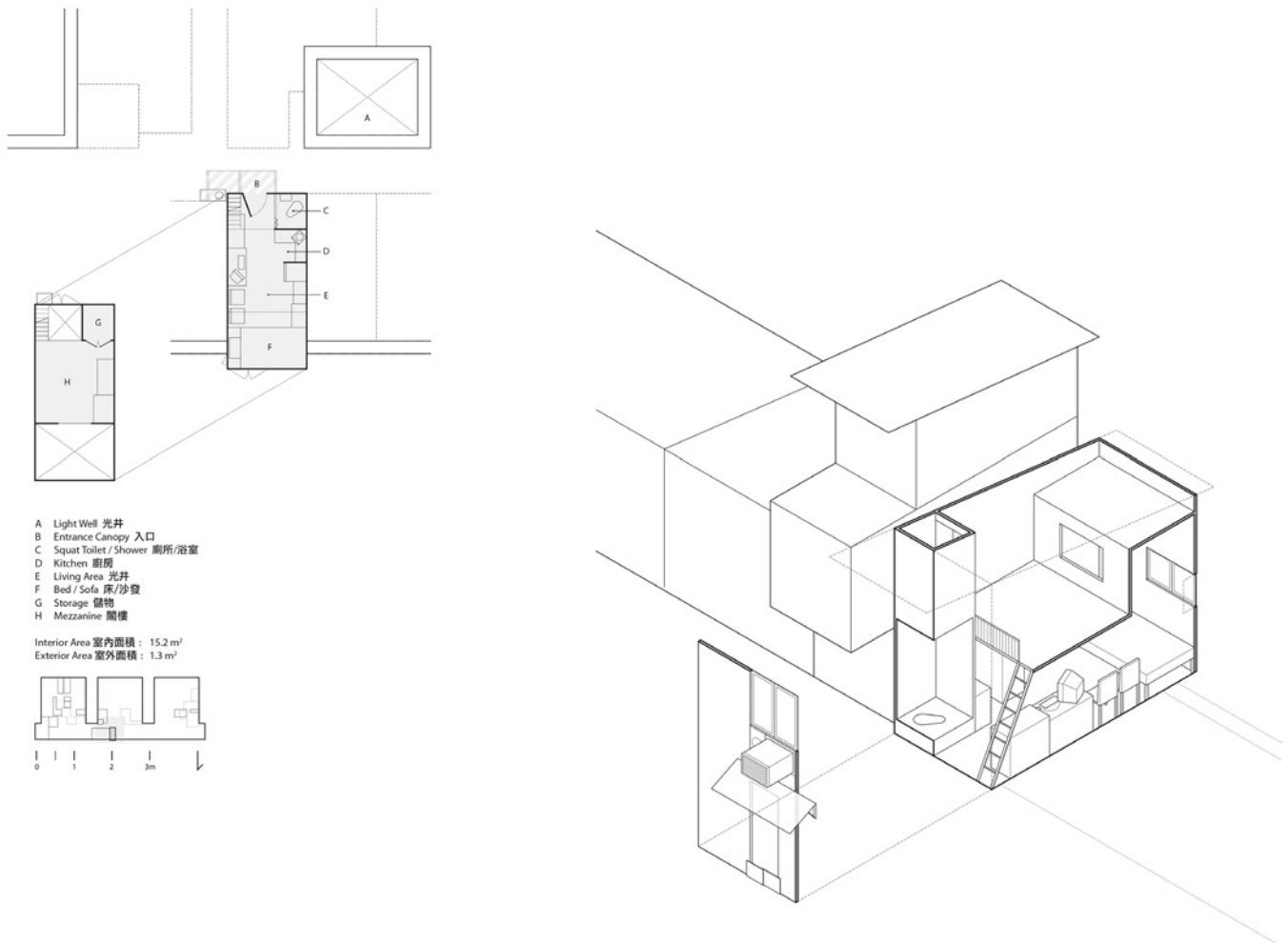


Figure 14: Building 5, Unit 5

**Building 5, Unit 5**

He decorates Unit 5.5 with a harmonized colour palette, simulated stained glass stick-ons, and potted greenery rotated between different locations to maximize direct sunlight. He believes the lushness of the plants brings good fortune. Uncertain of his tenure in this flat, he saw no need to purchase expensive furniture. Every piece was salvaged from trash. He rented a partitioned room with a small window in Sham Shui Po district for more than HK\$2,000/month before moving here four years ago. He prefers to live on a rooftop – convenient, cheap (only HK\$600/month), better air circulation, and more sunlight. The flat becomes overheated in the summer, but this does not bother him because he is hardly home during the day. As a chef, his workday begins at 9:00AM and ends at midnight. His wife and daughter live in Hangzhou, near Shanghai. He spends ten months every year working in Hong Kong, returning twice a year to Hangzhou. His family also comes to visit him. His daughter loves having the mezzanine level all to herself. His web camera and Internet connection allow him to keep in touch with his family.



Figure 15: Building 5, Unit 5



Figure 16: Building 5, Unit 5



Figure 17: Building 5, Unit 5

## 5.7

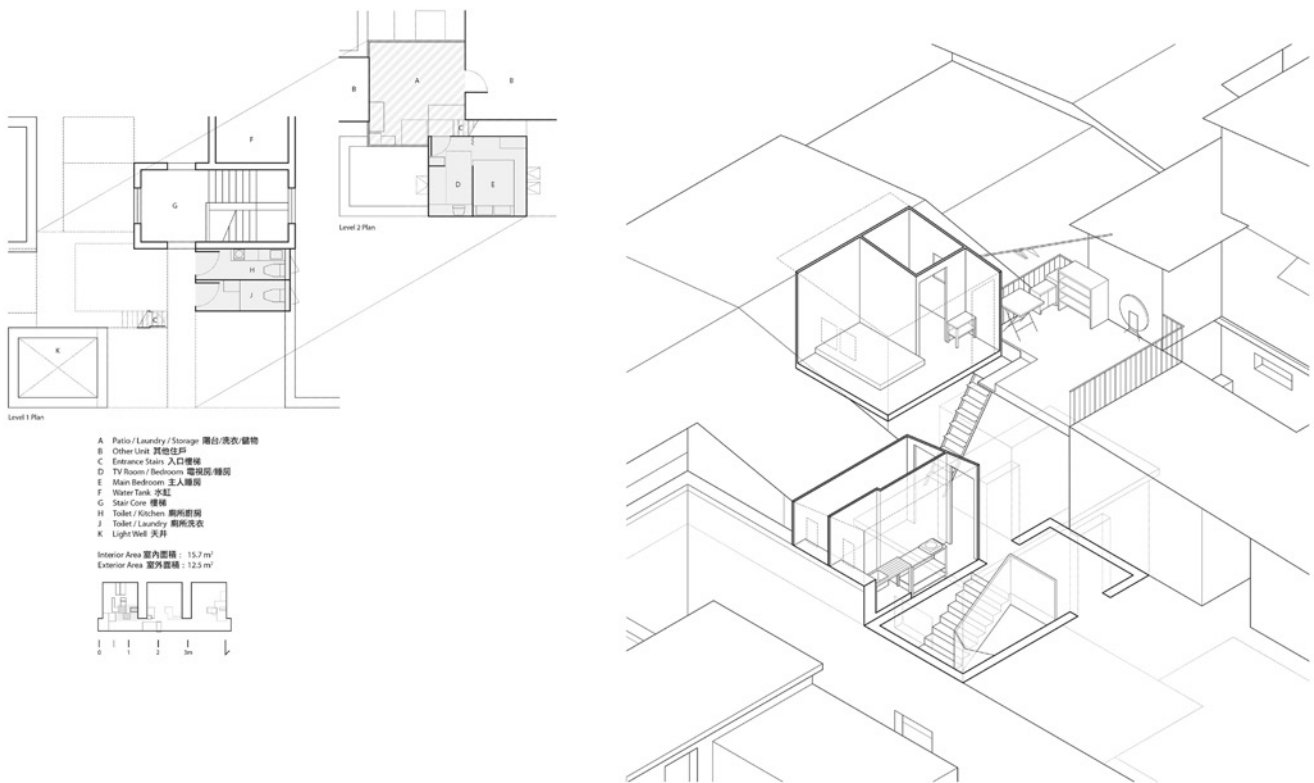


Figure 18: Building 5, Unit 7

**Building 5, Unit 7**

He lives here with his daughter and his girlfriend. The components of his unit are dispersed over two levels: utilities and service areas (kitchen, laundry, toilet, and shower) are on the lower floor, living and recreational spaces on the upper. He has to climb down a ladder and cross a public corridor to check on his pot of soup in the kitchen/washroom. The beds consist of thin mattresses laid out on the floor. A single mattress, located in the same room as the television, also functions as a sofa. The Tai Kok Tsui neighbourhood can be seen over the roofs of other rooftop structures from the shared outdoor patio. Numerous items help keep his own unit's roof in place and leak-proof; most notable ones are overlapping umbrellas and a broken microwave placed directly above the entrance into the main living space.



Figure 19: Building 5, Unit 7



Figure 20: Building 5, Unit 7

## PORTRAITS FROM ABOVE: ARTIST'S STATEMENT

There is no elevator. We walk up the eight flights of stairs, hesitating on the last one, looking at each other, out of breath: we have no right to be here.

The roof is a maze of corridors, narrow passageways between huts built of sheet metal, wood, brick and plastics. There are steps and ladders leading up to a second level of huts. We get lost. Our leaflets in hand, Rufina knocks on a door. There is an exchange in Cantonese. Stefan stands in the background, the foreigner, smiling, not understanding a word. They hear us out, smile back and invite us into their homes.

Later, we look down at the building from a higher one across the street. The roof is huge, like a village. There must be thirty or forty households on it. From the outside there is no way of knowing what is inside. Whether they have Internet or not. Whether they have a toilet. And there is no way of knowing their stories.

Who makes a picture of this? Who keeps a record? Sometimes a newspaper will print an article, or an NGO will launch a campaign. Various government departments keep files on so-called "unauthorized building works", coding the huts with permanent markers and photographing them. The files are not on public record, but residents may look at them to learn why their homes are to be demolished. Very rarely do rooftop residents document their own spaces: the family pictures we saw were taken standing in a field of sunflowers, or in a village in the mainland, or down on the street beside someone else's car, smiling.

We walk up the stairs again. We no longer get lost in the corridors. We learn how residents modify and maintain their homes. There are people who have been living on the roof for twenty or thirty years who have helped to build the city. The new immigrants from Mainland China, from Southeast Asia, from Pakistan, continue to do so. In the seventies, they built the underground, and now they are working on the new tower blocks. Hong Kong's older districts are being redeveloped. Some buildings are crumbling because they were built with salt water concrete. Others have to make way for taller ones that yield higher profits. Few rooftop residents would mind living in the new towers, but they cannot afford it. All are afraid of being resettled to the remote satellite towns, where there may be few opportunities and limited social networks.

We walk up the stairs again. The rooftop settlements are an urban legacy, telling the story of Hong Kong, of political upheavals in Mainland China, of urban redevelopment, of people's hopes and their needs in the city.

## REFERENCE

Chui, E. (2010) "Rooftop Housing in Hong Kong: An Introduction" in Rufina Wu – Stefan Canham, *Portraits from Above, Rooftop Settlements*, Berlin: Peperoni Books.



