Visual Essay

Hong Kong skins: signs and screens in a changing cityscape

Brian Sze-hang Kwok and Anneke Coppoolse

Abstract

Hong Kong's vertical cityscape presents two significant urban skins: one of explicit hues and one of particular disguise. Both these skins – materialized through neon signage and bamboo scaffolding – communicate visual narratives of Hong Kong that can be understood in their singularity and in their sequence. Neon signs and their distinct colour casts form visual skins of light that are highly particular to Hong Kong. Bamboo scaffolding, in its insistence on disguising both neon signs and entire façades, equally engenders local significance through handwork and skill as it layers up Hong Kong's urban space. Yet, despite its particular 'Hong Kong image', it increasingly forms a prequel to a disappearance of what could be called a Hong Kong aesthetic. Via scaffolding, old skins disappear and new ones prevail: new skins that increasingly represent not a search for but a permanently lost identity. This visual essay explores images of peeling urban skins that address a perpetual disappearance of significance in light of neoliberal monotony.

Keywords

The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

Hong Kong's urban landscape is perpetually mutating in the context of capital flow. Each building 'is potentially a ruin, premised on the logistics of here today, gone tomorrow' (Abbas, 1994: 442). In spite of this continuously changing urban space, Ackbar Abbas argues that architecture is also 'the first visual evidence of a city's putative identity'. This can be understood via Hong Kong's popular culture, in which cityscapes and urban landmarks commonly feature. So, Hong Kong's urban form is both significant and fugitive. Despite the popular articulation of the spatial context of the territory's urbanity, Abbas sees something of an 'unfamiliar in the familiar' emerging in rapid spatial change (Abbas, 1999: 158).

Further, 'the tendency of disappearance has been to promote a sense of placelessness which allowed the city to capitalise on its being a space-in-between' (Abbas, 1994: 452–453). This is reflected in Hong Kong's built environment and in its representations. Following Abbas who proposes that the visuality of such placelessness can be found in architecture, this visual essay considers the actual skins of the built space: façades and what covers them (see Figures 1–27). As certain visual anonymity exists throughout the city in the form of residential buildings and commercial spaces (p. 457), another form of anonymity or concealment prevails in the ever so familiar 'faces' of Hong Kong urban space: diverse concealment of façades as the familiar 'image' of Hong Kong.

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A scaffolded building facing Mido Café in Yau Ma Tei, Kowloon.

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A building with glass façade next to a scaffolded older façade in Jordan, Kowloon.

3

A Hong Kong street view with neon signs casting their hues over the street.

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Hotel Ginza sign casting its hue over a segment of the façade.

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A new lightbox has replaced an older neon sign.

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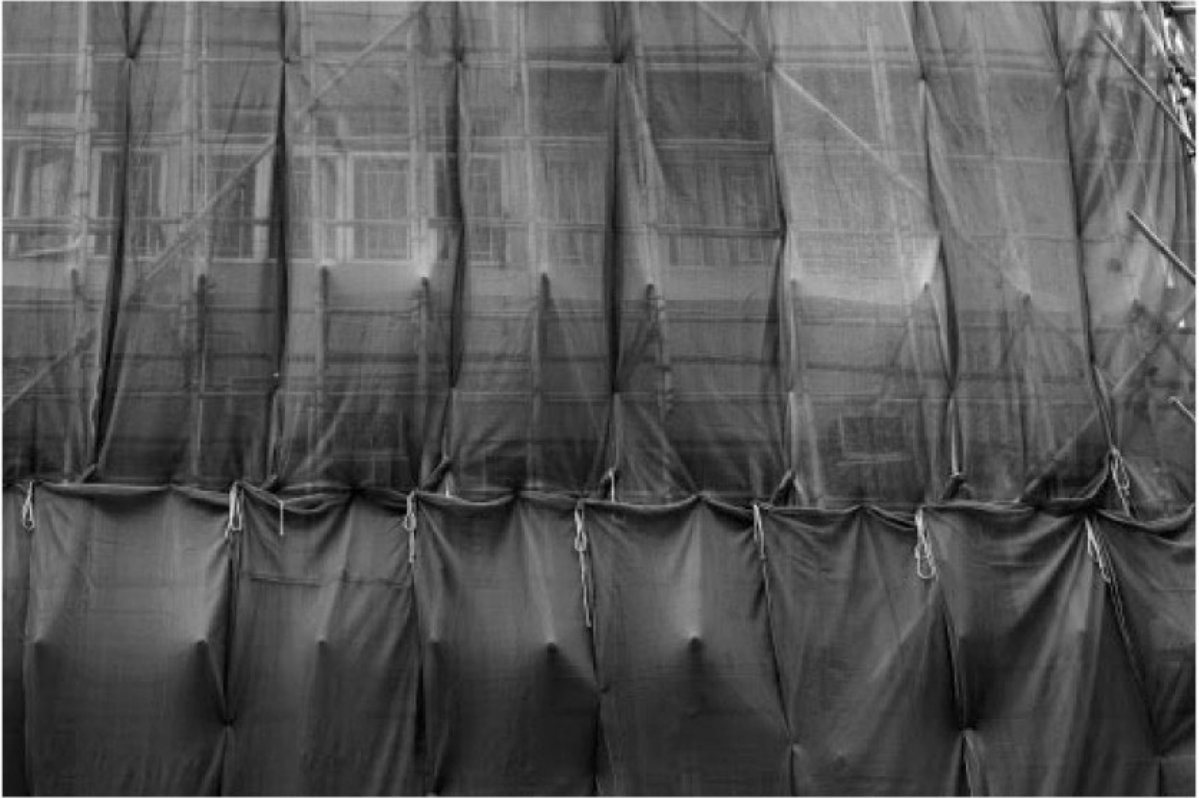
A new lightbox or LED sign is being put up.

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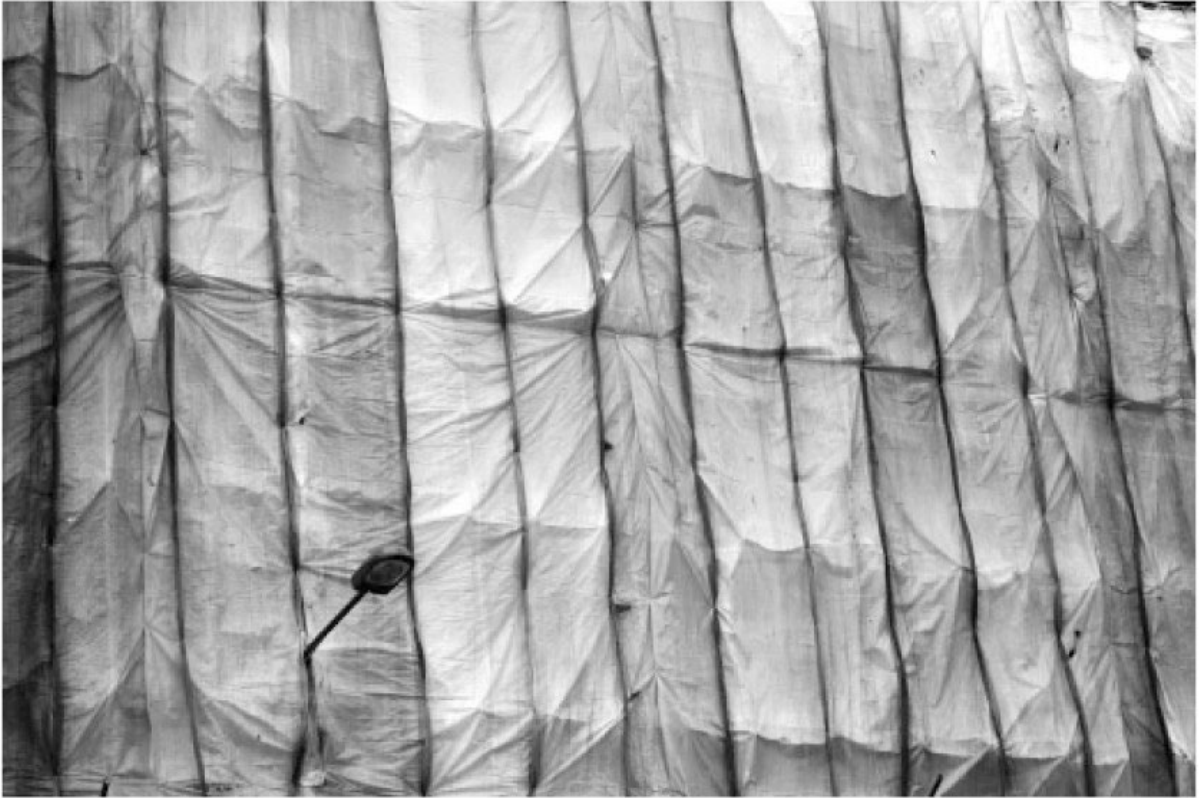Neon signs currently still holding strong while the building's façade is pending renovation.

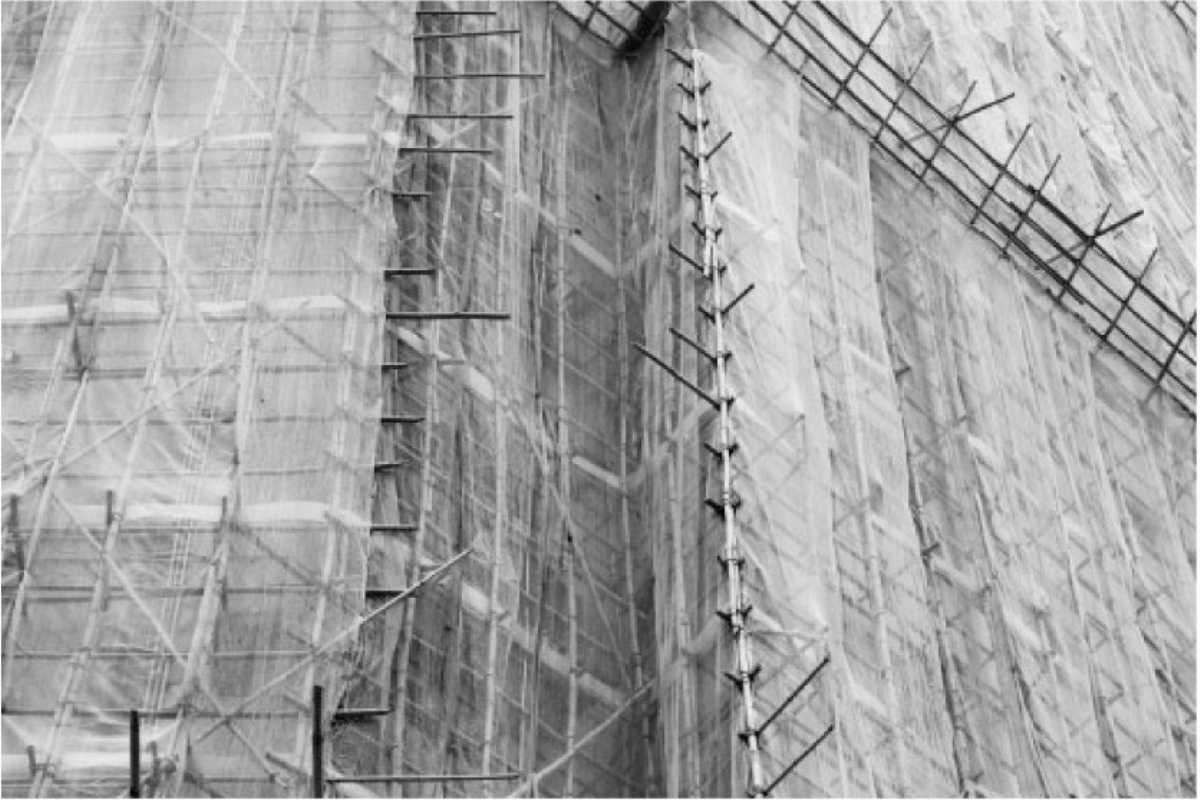

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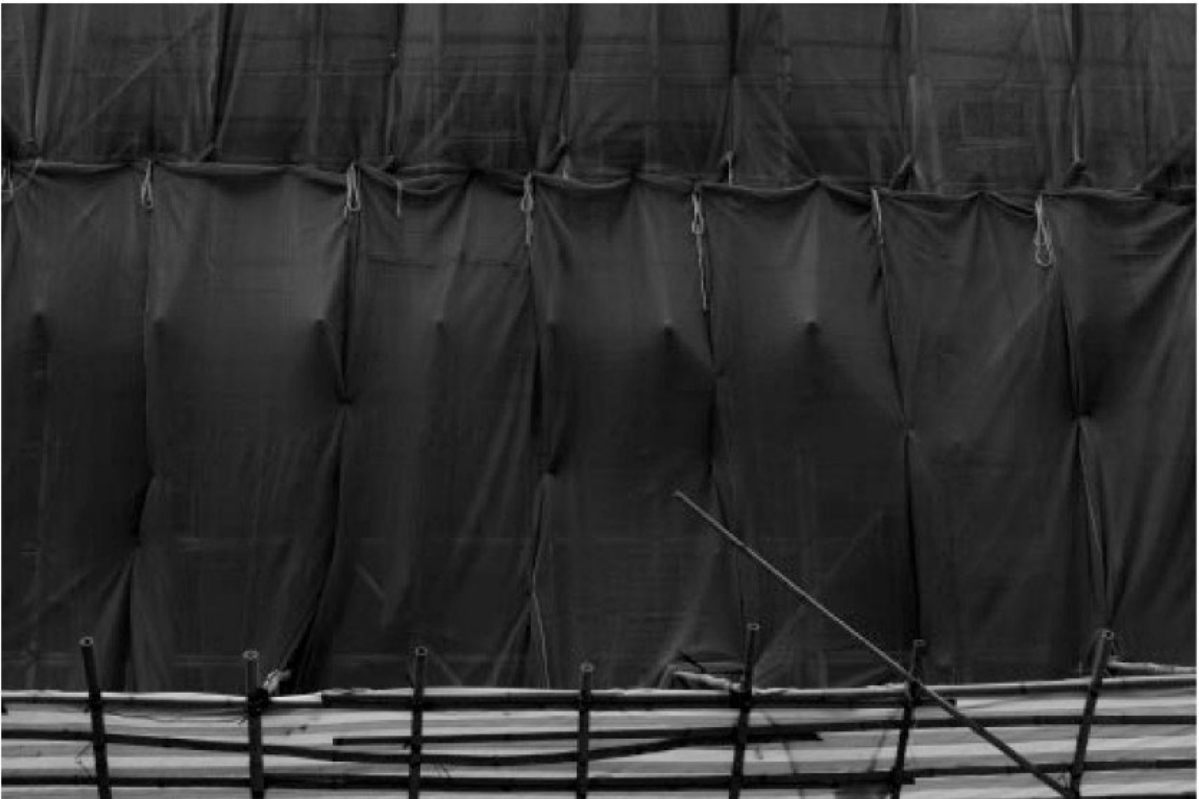Concealed façades are found across Hong Kong.

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At ground level, life continues and new spectacles emerge.

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A 'new landmark' in the making?

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The glass façade represents a new kind of 'familiar unfamiliar' as it faces an older residential building.

27
New patterns shape a familiar global image with skins of disguise projecting another kind of familiar.

Whilst Hong Kong's urban spaces are historically fleeting, however, recently uncovered façades point at an increasingly different 'unfamiliar': an 'unfamiliar' that rules out any opportunity for identity formation.

Anything about wh ich one knows that one soon will not have it around becomes an image. (Walter Benjamin, 1985<1938–1939>)

Hues

The neonscape is one of Hong Kong's most apparent visual markers. It is both significantly distinct and particularly spectacular in the sense of it being as Guy Debord (2006: 12) would call it 'a social relation among people, mediated by images'. Besides the distinct architectural verticality of the built environment, it is key 'visual evidence of [Hong Kong's] putative identity' (Abbas, 1994: 442). It is also widely represented in Hong Kong popular culture (e.g. Fallen Angels, 1995, dir. Wong Kar-wai) as well as in that of Japan (e.g. Ghost in the Shell, 1995, dir. Mamoru Oshii) and Hollywood (e.g. Pacific Rim, 2013, dir. Guillermo del Toro; Doctor Strange, 2016, dir. Scott Derrickson). While the neon landscape forms the background of these films and is considered typical of Hong Kong, it is also spectacularly distancing: familiar and unfamiliar.

Both the signs themselves and the hues they cast over the surrounding façades form skins of light that simultaneously mask and reveal. Yet, due to increased government regulation on sign sizes and safety, urban redevelopment and the rise of cheaper LED variants, neon signs

are increasingly disappearing from Hong Kong's streets (although some still survive). Hong Kong's skin of light is peeling off. Lights dim. Façades lose their neon casts.

Scaffolding

The peeling of hues happens via a transitional skin that both conceals and projects: a distinct skin of bamboo scaffolding. Bamboo scaffolding is found wrapped around new buildings under construction – skyscrapers in particular – as well as covering older façades in the context of renovation. The latter may simply involve a repainting of old walls, yet it might also be subject to more serious intervention. Regardless, scaffolding indicates transition. It stretches a moment of change from one 'face' into another.

Rey Chow (1992: 157, in McMahon, 2001: 120) argues that 'in-betweenness' is representative of Hong Kong; a characteristic that became especially evident, again, in variant forms of cultural production of the latter part of the 20th century. McMahon (2001: 132) considers related cultural products – just like scaffolding – to be and not be 'postmodern mediations on the vibrantly in-between city of Hong Kong'.

Bamboo scaffolding reveals on the one hand a face that translates into a distinct Hong Kong image: the skin of the 'in-between'. This image may be considered what Abbas calls 'familiar'. On the other hand, it presents building-high screens that conceal what was there before (another familiar) and project anticipated futures of change in cityscapes: an unfamiliar in the familiar.

Façades

Transitioning urban façades are losing their skins of neon colour casts via scaffolded layers of anticipation. The new faces that appear after bamboo scaffolding is lifted increasingly present a different kind of 'unfamiliar': an 'unfamiliar' that first and foremost addresses a global image of monotony. Rather, it reflects placelessness.

As Chu Yiu Wai (2013: 155) noted, Hong Kong's once unique position in the region as a trading port and British colony that had surpassed Britain in its economic ambition is unstable as an increasing number of Mainland Chinese cities are rapidly emerging as 'global cities' too. In the context of the built environment, 'the' global city appears to be 'any' global city where what has been concealed is not the façade, but uniqueness. Promised new landmarks become unmarked 'any place whatevers' (Augé, 1995). In light of neoliberal monotony, a disappearance of significance illustrates not an 'unfamiliar in the familiar' but a 'familiar in the unfamiliar'. The 'familiar' is only a reflection of what else is there. The 'unfamiliar' is the mirror itself: the glass façade.

Acknowledgments

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Biographical Notes

BRIAN SZE-HANG KWOK is an Assistant Professor in the School of Design at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. He leads the BA (Hons) in Communication Design programme and the Information Design Lab. His research interests are in health communication, information design and urban visual culture. He is currently pursuing his PhD in the Department of Typography and Graphic Communication at the University of Reading, UK.

Address: School of Design, Jockey Club Innovation Tower (Block V), The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hung Hom, Kowloon, Hong Kong.

email: sdbriank@polyu.edu.hk

ANNEKE COPPOOLSE is an Assistant Professor in the School of Design at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. She focuses on urban visual culture and the visuality of abandoned objects in Hong Kong and she navigates related questions of aesthetics and lived experience, academically and curatorially.

Address: as Brian Sze-Hang Kwok.

email: anneke.coppoolse@polyu.edu.hk