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## **Kowloon Walled City as urban border. Community-based home and neighborhood building: an interview with Greg Girard <sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract:**

*The Kowloon Walled City in Hong Kong was, until 1994, one of the densest self-made building of the Chinese community of the city, and on the earth. It was seen, for a long period, as a virtually lawless labyrinth of crime, commerce and hope. The photographic research realized in 1993 by the Canadian photographer Greg Girard, a complete document on the last year of life of the Walled City of Hong Kong, has the value of showing us that the analysis of a space is not exhausted in the register of the typology but that it is possible to go further, where the human fabric is full of relationships and unexpected balances.*

**Keywords:** *Urban borders, neighborhood building, Kowloon Walled City, photography.*

### **Resumen:**

*La ciudad amurallada de Hong Kong (Kowloon Walled City) fue hasta 1994, uno de los barrios autoconstruidos por la comunidad China de Hong Kong y de mayor densidad de la ciudad y en el mundo. Fue calificado, durante mucho tiempo, como un espacio laberintico ilegal, sede del crimen, lugar de comercio y espacio de esperanza.*

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<sup>1</sup>Based in Shanghai, Greg Girard is a photographer working to record the changes taking place in China and across Asia for leading editorial and corporate clients. Born in Canada in 1955, Girard grew up in Vancouver. In 1986 he began his photographic career at *Asiaweek*, covering news and features in Hong Kong. Between 1987 and 1997 Girard photographed on assignment across Asia. In 1993, with co-author Ian Lambot, he published the book *City of Darkness*, a document of the final years of Kowloon's "Walled City," a Hong Kong high-rise that was home to 35,000 people. In 2002, in collaboration with fellow photographer Fritz Hoffmann, Girard launched the picture agency document CHINA, an online archive specializing in contemporary photography from China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Girard's photographs have appeared in publications such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Fortune*, *Forbes*, *Elle*, *Paris-Match*, *Stern*, the *New York Times Magazine*, and others worldwide. His work has been exhibited in galleries in South Korea, London, Germany, Helsinki, and New York. Actually he lives and works in Shanghai.

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*La investigación fotográfica realizada en 1993 por el fotógrafo canadiense Greg Girard, un documento completo del último año de vida de la ciudad amurallada de Hong Kong, tiene el valor de mostrarnos que el análisis de un espacio no se agota en el registro de la tipología, sino que es posible ir más allá, ahí donde el tejido humano está lleno de relaciones y equilibrios inesperados.*

**Palabras Clave:** *Fronteras urbanas, unidades de vecindario, Kowloon Walled City, fotografía.*

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The debate on the peculiarities of the world metropolises leads us to talk about Chinese cities as the representative example of many current forms issues of urban interest: firstly for their unique cultural history, partly because the major urban phenomena of the twenty-first century may not occur in the nation that soon will become the main power. Showing a very complex intersection of different way of living, contemporary Chinese cities, as a result of the combination between tradition and revolution, appear chaotic and in continuous ferment in the intersection of different ways of living.

The urban fabrics and the large cities' shapes are continuously developing, due to the rapid housing growth driven by urbanization's phenomenons that take place through actions of "forced urban renewal" in inhabited places. The latter are, in most cases, typical spaces of an architecture without architects and the result of an anarchic city that makes clear, by its mere existence, not only the many dimensions of latent socio-spatial exclusion in the contemporary city, but even the ingenious space solutions devised by the inhabitants themselves.

Many of the large Chinese cities have agreed to fit in a "diabolic planning" in which are slaves of the logic market that is promoter of relocation's processes of resident population. This is precisely how many inhabited universes, symbols of an ancient spatial culture, are subjected to the needs of a pure instrumentality that materializes the economy's domain on any aspect of the social dimension.

These cities, which have changed fastly, are not only larger but also more complex and heterogeneous: they mingle, as if it were palimpsests, processes of "reuse", that clear the old self-built neighborhoods and the sociability's realities weaved into them, and give birth to new urban areas built and thought outside of any "rational planning" logic: enterprises and technological innovation' circuits, real islands made of concrete, spaces for the production of services and competitive cultural goods .

What the official look considered "pure noise" (because it probably came from a grassroots point of view) or simple interference (in the impossible task of *mathematize* the city), the shrewd observation skill, which depicts the world at the right distance, the cautious and respectful look of a photographer such as Greg Girard has illuminated with the right light and revealed.

The documentary photographic research (begun in 1985 and completed in 1993) about the last years of the "Walled City"<sup>3</sup> of Kowloon, in Hong Kong, realized in collaboration with the photographer Ian Lambot, represents a unique opportunity to understand how, for many inhabitants of the big Chinese metropolis, houses are no longer "the houses for a life" but temporary houses, never permanent, definitive: clusters of temporary spaces that are inserted, they overlap and interact with the changing urban and human fabric.

The photographic research by Greg Girard above all has the value of showing that the analysis of a space is not exhausted in the register of the typology but, you can go further, where the human fabric is full of relationships and unexpected balances.

### **How long have you been working in Asia and why have you chosen to work as photographer of cities like Hong Kong, Tokyo and Shanghai?**

I first visited Asia in 1974. After high school I worked for a year and saved money and traveled by cargo ship (as a passenger) from San Francisco to Hong Kong. The first pictures of Asia were from the deck of that ship. I travelled in the region for a year and then later lived in Tokyo in the late 1970s, and was photographing pretty much constantly during this time. I had no idea how to go about making a living from photography. Paying attention to that part of things only came much later. I didn't start making my living as a photographer until 1987, 15 years after I first started taking pictures. I simply had no idea how one went about trying to make a living from it. In any case, I got interested in that part of the world when I was quite young, reading the novels of Graham Green and others, and was simply photographing the places where I was living and travelling. I grew up in a suburb of Vancouver, Canada, and being in a large Asian city in those days felt perhaps farther away than it might today. There was probably a strong element of "escape" in my travels and later decision to try and live in Tokyo and Hong Kong, and now Shanghai.

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<sup>3</sup> The *Kowloon Walled City* was located in the heart of Hong Kong, a formal British colony and now a special administrative region of China. Its area coverage is 2.9 hectares (size around four football fields) and with 359 tenement buildings sticking together on this plot of land at a height of 10 to 16 storeys, it was a conglomeration of buildings which formed a living and breathing organic creature. As Hong Kong is one of the densest cities on the planet, the Kowloon Walled City tries to put this into test. With an average of 13,000 persons per hectares compared to that of New York City of a 91 persons per hectares, it pushed a surrealistic extreme of the living environment of mankind. For architects it was an anti-architectural thesis which cannot be created; for authorities it was a scum in a modern city which they should get rid of; for foreigners it was a place of exotic experience, good for adventure but inhuman for living. Surprisingly, many residents did not want to move out after the government announced the demolition. For the local residents there, it was their home, it was their city where children have grown up and people have made their own living. The triad gangsters might sound frightening while the opium divans, brothels and gambling dens seem mysterious, but to the locals, all these activities were part of the city. As long as their livings were not interfered, they would just accept these as parts of their everyday life, just as they accept the hyper-dense, poor hygiene and badly serviced living environment. Its hyper density had tested the limit of a livable environment for mankind. Its heterogeneity had exceeded our cognition of what a modern city should be. Its spontaneity has challenged the necessity and the role of an architect or urban planner in building a city.

**Why, between many possible portrayals of China, have you chosen the one of communities that live confined in dilapidated buildings and neighborhoods that bear the signs of an imminent demolition?**

I think there was probably some initial element of surprise, a particular personal experience that provided new information that differed from the received wisdom of the day. In the case of the Walled City the surprise came first from the very fact that a place like that existed in modern Hong Kong, and secondly that despite its reputation as a dangerous place hostile to outsiders it actually functioned as a rather traditional community that had developed startling, resourceful and original ways to deal with the challenges of living in such an astonishingly crowded and nominally unregulated physical environment. When I first started visiting the Walled City its demolition hadn't yet been decreed and so it was strictly an effort to explore and try and render something of the experience of being there. As for Shanghai, the experience was of finding a city where these early 20<sup>th</sup> century buildings were being used in ways never intended, places built for one family housing ten, twenty or more families. No urban development for profit had taken place for more than forty years and as Shanghai was starting to make itself modern again this rare and specific kind of "old" was starting to disappear without a trace.

**Could you tell us how you heard about the existence of Kowloon Walled City and what had you been photographing in Hong Kong before you ran into this real human settlement?**

Living in Hong Kong in the mid 1980s one heard about the Walled City but it was a place with a reputation as dirty dark and dangerous. I stumbled across it by accident one night in 1986 while photographing in the streets near the HK's old airport in Kowloon. So yes I had been photographing in Hong Kong since I moved there in 1982.

**Since the mid-eighties Ryuji Miyamoto has dedicated to the photography of buildings in ruins. He also focuses the camera toward the caducity of architecture immortalizing unusual images of familiar architecture: buildings' corpses, architectural skeletons and urban shipwrecks close to death. Also Miyamoto took pictures of Kowloon Walled City in 1987, documenting its life and its agony. Had you already known his work when you began your photographic reportage? Was he a reference for you?**

I didn't know of his work at the time I started photographing the Walled City. At the time I started photographing there I hadn't started making a living as a photographer. I wasn't really aware of what was happening in the art world or however one would describe that area where photography, art and architecture overlap. This was pre-internet and there weren't many places in HK at the time to buy or look at art/photography books or magazines.



© Greg Girard, *Kowloon Walled City series*

**The photographic work done on the "Walled City" is the result of a collective work made with the photographer Ian Lambot. Was there also a team working-brainstorming- or has every one worked independently, comparing the results only in a final stage?**

Lan and I were working independently of each other, photographing the Walled City, and were introduced at a party. We later met up and compared notes and decided to try and combine resources since our approaches were quite different.

**Was it difficult to get in touch with the people of the "Walled City" before you could start to photograph them in their everyday lives and in their workplaces and spaces of private life? Had someone mediated this meeting? If so, how much has your work been affected by this mediation?**

It took time before people would agree to let me into their homes and shops, but it should be noted that things got easier after the government announced that the place would be demolished. Residents eventually started to get used to people coming around to have a look at the Walled City once the news of its imminent demise became public.



© Greg Girard, *Kowloon Walled City series*

**How much did you know about life and personal histories of the people before starting to photograph them? How long have you been in that place before the first shoot that gave you the key to get in there?**

I didn't know much about the history of the Walled City or its residents before I started photographing there. Once Ian and I decided to move ahead with the idea to make a book we hired an undergrad student, Emmy Lung, from the University of HK to work with us, compiling interviews and personal histories of residents. At some point the residents start to realize that you are serious about trying to make a fair record of life there. Nobody would spend that much time there if they weren't essentially sympathetic to the place and its residents.

**What was the goal that drove you in the selection of areas and subjects to photograph? Did you want to tell a story of this "city in the city" pending demolition? Did you want to tell a story, as complete as possible, or tell only the best stories and record the spaces more representative?**

Personally speaking one sensed the incredible complexity of the place, and it was a fascinating challenge to try and understand the various networks and strategies that allowed it to function and respond to the needs of its residents. I think both Ian and I from the start wanted to present the Walled City as a place that, despite the uniquely difficult conditions, actually "worked". The only stories in the popular press that we ever came across described the Walled City in a simplistic and sensationalist manner as a "den of iniquity", a "slum" and other conventionally judgemental terms, and entirely missed the larger point about the extraordinary balancing act that allowed an unheard of sort of "normal" life to take place.





© Greg Girard, *Kowloon Walled City series*

**Do you feel the creator or the interpreter of life scenes and spaces that you photographed?**

As a photographer I respond on a very basic level to things so I would say very much the interpreter rather than the creator.

**Why did you choose to photograph the everyday life, ordinary things, people at work, the moments of family gathering and conviviality among neighbors and not to interpret uses and transformations of architecture, buildings, space in their pure technical-constructive nature?**

The book I hope achieved a combination of those things, the Walled city as an architectural phenomenon, and a document of how life was lived within that phenomenon. It is true that my initial approach, although never discussed between Ian and I as such, provided the pictures of the everyday life of the residents while Ian looked at the physical space. Over time that distinction blurred and we each photographed both the people their activities and the physical nature of the place.

**What would have you liked to photograph, that you could not retract in the "Walled City" of Hong Kong? What have you particularly fascinated?**

I wish I had "discovered" it earlier than I did. I first visited Hong Kong in 1974 and would have liked to see what it was like then. Also, I didn't photograph much of the demolition. There is a single picture in the book about that, and that does seem fitting

since we intended the book to be about the *living* Walled City. By the time the demolition began it meant that our project was essentially over. But, if I'm honest, as much one can't really feel regret for its passing, of course one does. So it was actually quite hard, after photographing there for five years, to watch its demise. Less the destruction of the physical structure perhaps but rather the dispersal of the community within it—though of course the two are absolutely inseparable.

**Did you ever have the feeling, or the certainty, that the people of Kowloon Walled City felt marginalized?**

People living outside the Walled City may have passed judgment on the place and its residents, like people anywhere might look down on the less privileged, but the residents themselves were for the most part industrious immigrants from outside Hong Kong (Hong Kong itself is a city built by immigrants from outside of Hong Kong) and lived a working class family-oriented life and I don't doubt were comfortable in their own skins and felt the world owed them nothing. People moved into the Walled City by choice, rent was cheaper there and of course the unregulated nature of life and commerce there meant that one could function mostly without government and regulatory oversight.



© Greg Girard, *Kowloon Walled City series*

**Looking at your photos, those relating to work areas and domestic spheres, we see a story done for images' sequences. A tale that takes us, in many times, to the origins of things in the sense of the production-process. Why did you choose to work through a narrative for images in sequence?**

Walking through the maze of Walled City “streets” (narrow walkways in fact) you would pass, one after another, small hives of domestic and commercial activity—the



domestic and the commercial, or even industrial, taking place in the same space- and it simply felt natural to show something of the processes (mostly small-scale and highly repetitive) taking place in these spaces.

**The meaning of "proximity" and "permeability" between the spaces that can be detected by observing your photos tells us a strong sense of complicity and tolerance among the inhabitants. Surely, both in domestic spaces as in the work places or in public spaces, you have been able to identify the hierarchy between spaces. What were the most representative areas for the residents of the Walled City and what were the community spaces which they would never give up?**

The Walled City marketed its spaces according to very conventional commercial and residential real estate considerations: commercial rents were higher if a shop had “street” access along a well-traveled corridor; residential rents were higher if a place had windows allowing fresh air and light. One should remember that the Walled City didn’t function in isolation from Hong Kong –at street level on at least two of its sides it looked much like the surrounding densely populated neighborhood: shops at street level with apartments above. So, residents moved freely around the neighboring streets, shopping and socializing. Similarly, people living nearby might visit the Walled City for medical or dental care -the Walled City’s doctors and dentists were cheaper, as their practices weren’t regulated by Hong Kong law.



© Greg Girard, *Kowloon Walled City series*

**Working on the relationship between life and space, or rather, life in spaces. You photographed in Kowloon Walled City both areas of work as domestic spaces by picturing them through scenes that talk about overlapping areas and functions, but also about poor hygienic conditions. The table is a surface where to work**

**during the day, game and study space for children during the hours of homework and the base on which to sleep during the night. Did you ever think that a report like this could be a useful document for all who draw "the distant city", to say that those spaces were inadequate even having a better visual evidence sufficient to justify its destruction?**

I'm not sure what "the distant city" refers to but, in any case, no, I never considered that. As is probably obvious, I wasn't looking to show what was "wrong" with the Walled City. If anything I was guided by the idea that the place "worked" in ways that defied the usual conventions.

**Can we say that photographing Kowloon Walled City you used your work as an experience of social protest? The aesthetics of your photos is here defined by ethics?**

In a way you could say that my photographs of the Walled City were a kind of protest, but perhaps not in the way that you mean. They could be said to be a protest against the narrowness of the popular press of the day and the points of view that deny the reality in front of you, and instead force a dismal received wisdom on the reader or viewer. The shock for me at visiting the Walled City for the first time was that nobody had ever described the magnificent and unique nature of the place.



© Greg Girard, *Kowloon Walled City series*

**If we consider the relationship of photography with time, not only in the work on Kowloon, but also in your current research about Shanghai, it seems that the past prevails on the future: the predilection for pictures that focus on almost disappeared spaces: public washrooms, particular types of buildings. Do you frame by your pictures landscape's mutations or the persistence of tradition and memory?**

In the case of Shanghai I can say that although everyone knew that period buildings and neighborhoods from the early 20th century were disappearing, nobody knew what they looked like inside –unless you happened to live in them. Looking inside one discovered living arrangements where homes built for one family had been subdivided to accommodate many more than intended. Not many resources were devoted to cosmetic upkeep but the entire insides of buildings had been altered to accommodate the new (at the time) reality of state appropriation of private property and subsequent rewards and punishment based on class as defined by China’s new rulers in 1949. So, what I felt I was seeing was a very specific kind of “old” that I had never come across before, and one that was about to disappear as Shanghai was trying to make itself “modern” again. This is a long way of saying that I tend to get interested in something in a general way and then later, by chance as it were, discover some core and overlooked truth that provides a path to follow in making work about it.



© Greg Girard, *Phantom Shanghai* series

**The modern city that of the international marks, is distant, almost imperceptible, denied, absent in the work about Kowloon Walled City, and even in your research on Shanghai. There is not a register of a passage between the interior and exterior but an opening on an urban diffuse landscape. What do you want to communicate through this distant focus? Do you want to tell the conflict between two cities: one that is born and one that resist? Could you tell us what happens to that distant city?**



In Shanghai, as the city was trying to become “modern,” again, before the demolition of old neighborhoods had become so thorough, there was a sense of two Shanghai’s trying to occupy the same space. Most of those neighborhoods had been preserved “by accident”, as urban development for profit came to a halt for forty years. After years of stasis the process was reversed, again by political directive, and Shanghai started making up for lost time. And so for me there has always been a sense that time has flowed very hard through Shanghai: its early incarnation as a product of colonial ambitions, isolation and neglect following Mao’s victory, then a reverse-engineered showcase of Beijing’s efforts to make a modern metropolis, and now a mix of central planning and capitalist churn. I wanted to make something that reflected this complicated history, its present compromises, and at minimum to avoid most of the nostalgia associated with early 20th century Shanghai.



© Greg Girard, *Phantom Shanghai* series

**How many planners or architects do you think have visited at least once in their life districts such as Kowloon Walled City? Do you think that your work as photographer, based primarily on a visual research of the city and of its living spaces, can help urban planners, architects and politicians to design spaces tailored to the needs of the people?**

I was certainly surprised to learn that “City of Darkness<sup>4</sup>” had gotten attention from architects and architecture students. I don’t think either Ian and I set out to make a book that would show the Walled City as a kind of model yet we were obviously responsive to the unique ways in which the place defied notions about how a city or community was supposed to work. Whether there are lessons there for others, for people such as architects or urban planners, I really can’t say.

**The immanence of ruin. It seems impossible to consider your pictures without thinking about the economic atmosphere that produced them. Are they the evidence of an interrupted civilization?**

In each of the two projects (Kowloon Walled City, Phantom Shanghai) the photographs are in response to very specific economic, historical and political conditions. Perhaps they share a simple fascination for what can happen when the built environment becomes detached from the conditions that normally dictate how a place works or is supposed to work.

**You have worked and lived in Shanghai since more than 10 years now. What has this city been telling you and what do you like to tell about this contemporary megalopolis?**

In the past ten years Shanghai has started growing more naturally into the role created for it –that of a supposed “world city”, though it very much remains a work in progress, as is China itself, and as such one can’t help but wonder how it will all end up.



© Greg Girard, *Phantom Shanghai* series

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<sup>4</sup> Ian Lambot, Greg Girard (Ed.), *City of Darkness: Life in Kowloon Walled City*, Paperback, 1999.



**What would you investigate today, which you has not done yet?**

For the past two years I've been working on a project that looks at US military bases and their host communities in this part of the world –which means Japan, Korea and Guam. I've visited something like 25 different bases, including some in Europe as well. For one thing I wanted to step away from China's relentless topicality, and for another I wanted to revisit an area of interest that developed when I was quite young and living in Tokyo in the 1970s.



© Greg Girard, *Phantom Shanghai* series

**More about the artist:**

<http://www.greggirard.com>