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From Cultural Service to Cultural Infrastructure: A Review of Cultural and Urban Development in Hong Kong from the 1960s–2000s

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Abstract

This paper examines Hong Kong's cultural development from the 1960s to the 2000s through the emerging concept of "cultural infrastructure", which reframes cultural facilities as networked systems rather than isolated landmarks. Analyzing two distinct periods and cultural development approach—the late-colonial welfare provision and post-handover culture-led development—the study traces how urban planning imperatives have consistently shaped cultural provision across different governance regimes. The paper adopts an architectural history approach to investigate five major cultural development schemes: the Hong Kong Cultural Centre, municipal Town Halls, Civic Centres, the West Kowloon Cultural District, and the Conserving Centre heritage regeneration scheme. By operationalizing cultural infrastructure across spatial, governance, and network dimensions, the analysis reveals how different typologies and operational models encode particular dispositions that enable or constrain cultural practices. The findings demonstrate that despite shifts from public welfare investment to public-private partnership, cultural planning in Hong Kong remained subordinate to urban development and real estate logics. The paper argues that understanding cultural development as infrastructure that accounts for both visible structure and invisible substrates of funding, governance, and programming can provide a framework for cross-disciplinary dialogue between cultural and urban planning practices. In line with the Culture, Sports, and Tourism Bureau's establishment in 2022, this paper proposes a framework for reimagining cultural development as networked infrastructure that foregrounds the enabling conditions for inclusive production rather than speculative consumption, with relevance for other Asian cities confronting similar developmental tensions.

Keywords

Cultural infrastructure, Hong Kong, urban planning and development, cultural planning and policy, architecture

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Introduction

In the early post-war years, culture was of minor importance in Hong Kong's public policy as the colonial government focused on more immediate urban and social welfare concerns. Leisure and cultural services were only gradually incorporated into the policy agenda in the 1960s, especially after the Urban Council's organizational reform in 1973. Extensive urban development driven by exponential population growth provided an opportunity to construct public amenities across the territory, aiming to enhance access to cultural resources that resonate with postwar welfare-state cultural policy in the West. In the post-industrial economies of the late 20th century, cities began to embrace culture as a development driver (Scott 2000), and urban policymakers deployed strategies such as building new cultural landmarks for downtown regeneration (Grodach 2008) or growing creative industry clusters to attract new knowledge-sector residents and businesses (Scott 2004). The uncritical embrace of culture as an economic catalyst raises a fundamental question about whether cultural and urban development objectives can truly align. Cultural policy scholar Justin O'Connor (2024) suggested that measuring culture-led development through aggregated economic outputs can easily conceal the fact that multinational corporations are the main beneficiaries, leading to the further question of how the benefits of such development can reach local artists and the community.

This paper examines the relationship between urban and cultural planning in Hong Kong by revisiting its cultural development history from the 1960s to the 2000s, accounting for two periods of active cultural development from the cultural facilities built during the last decades of colonial rule to the period followed by a variety of cultural venues conceived after the sovereignty handover in 1997. Despite shifts in the political landscape, continuities persist in the way cultural development is coupled with urban and economic development logics. Operating with different objectives, methodologies, and professional cultures, there is a disciplinary knowledge gap between cultural and urban planning practices, which are often in disjunction and sometimes in tension during the implementation of urban policy. The paper reviews the intersections, divergences, and tensions between cultural policy intentions and urban development imperatives, adopting the emerging concept of "cultural infrastructure" as a lens to examine the trajectories of five cultural development schemes in Hong Kong. The objective is to seek an alternative model of cultural development that creates conditions for culture rather than relying on one-off investing in landmark projects or programmes. Can the cultural infrastructure framework serve as a common platform that bridges these differences and supports a future model for integrated, inclusive, and resilient cultural development?

The infrastructural approach to cultural planning allows us to rethink the dependence on new construction and cultural consumption by turning our attention to existing resources and cultural production (Kim 2020; Mar 2023). Cultural and urban policymakers are increasingly adopting this approach and incorporating cultural sector considerations into spatial and urban resource planning, reflected in research and action plans from cities in the UK, Australia, and Canada (Ang et al. 2016; Bingham-Hall and Kaasa 2019;

Duxbury 2015). While the detailed focus of these studies varies, they all point to the need to establish cross-disciplinary dialogue and strategies in urban and cultural development. For Hong Kong, it is a timely opportunity to engage public and professional discourse on the role of culture in urban development with the recent establishment of the Culture, Sports, and Tourism Bureau (CSTB) and the publication of the Blueprint for Arts and Culture and Creative Industries Development in 2024. Building on the author's ongoing research on Hong Kong's cultural development trajectory (Yiu 2022; 2024), this paper provides a basis for such discussion by reviewing two models of cultural development—culture as welfare provision and culture as a speculative instrument—through the lens of cultural infrastructure. It also sheds light on how the Western ideology of cultural planning is translated to the distinct social, political, and developmental Asian context, which can be relevant to other cities grappling with similar challenges in balancing cultural development with urban growth imperatives.

Paradigms in Urban Cultural Policy

From Public Cultural Service to Culture-led Development

Following the 19th-century egalitarian conception of culture as a civic instrument of society (Bennett 1995), postwar European welfare states constructed museums, libraries, and cultural centres as part of their cultural policy to democratize access to culture and foster citizenship (Swenarton, Avermaete, and van den Heuvel 2015). In urban planning, cultural facilities are treated as public amenities, with the objective to effectively distribute cultural resources across geographies (Evans 2001). The late-colonial government in Hong Kong adopted this model and incorporated municipal cultural facilities into new towns and urban districts planning according to the principle of providing a balanced lifestyle that includes places for living, working, as well as recreation and culture (Bristow 1989). However, in a different political and social context, the colonial territory adopted functional and operational strategies while intentionally avoiding the connotations of citizenship or nationalistic sentiments (Yep and Lui 2010), adopting a narrative of "community" building aimed at maintaining social stability. Despite continued investment in cultural facilities since the 1970s, early scholars suggested that there has never been a holistic cultural policy in Hong Kong (Ooi 1995), and the consultation associated with the government's Arts Policy Review report in 1993 was criticised for its retrospective focus and failure to praise visionary planning (Clarke 1996). As such, Hong Kong's cultural policy discussions remained fragmented, primarily over funding and resources for established art forms, while the planning of cultural facilities was subordinated to urban development goals.

Since the 1980s, the cultural economy paradigm has emerged in response to post-industrial urban transformation, as policymakers began to see culture as a catalyst for economic growth, urban regeneration, and global competitiveness (Scott 2004). Iconic cultural buildings became the feature of urban masterplans or regeneration schemes, celebrated for their capacity to attract tourism, stimulate real estate development, and

enhance city branding (Plaza 2006). This turn to cultural economy was also reflected in Hong Kong's cultural and urban policy since the 2000s, where support for arts and culture shifted from a social expenditure item to a productive economic instrument (Yiu 2022). After Hong Kong's sovereignty handover in 1997 and the dissolution of the two municipal councils, discussion of Hong Kong's cultural policy was centralised under the Home Affairs Bureau (HAB) at the strategic level, while the new Leisure and Cultural Service Department (LCSD) serves as an operational department. The 2003 Policy Recommendation Report by the Cultural and Heritage Commission (CHC) signals the departure of the government-led cultural service model into strategies that encourage civic or private-sector partnerships, which also opens up opportunities to develop a variety of cultural venues, including the repurposing of existing building stock. In the same year, the government's Central Policy Unit commissioned a Baseline Study on Hong Kong Creative Industries, introducing an economically driven framework for cultural development that expanded its scope beyond traditional arts and culture activities, positioning culture as a driver for economic growth. Although the CHC report and the creative industries study emerged from different policy logics, they intersected in their shared goal of urban economic growth and have shaped Hong Kong's urban space through cultural development projects of varying scales over the past two decades (Charrieras, Darchen, and Sigler 2018).

This convergence of cultural and economic agendas reflects a broader global trend in urban cultural policy, where culture is capitalized on for its capacity to drive urban revitalisation, city branding, and investment attraction (Grodach 2017). However, the negative impact of culture-led development has also raised concerns about exacerbating inequality and gentrification (Florida 2017; Zukin 1988). These critiques underscore the risk that landmark cultural projects may detach from local development and communities (Alaily-Mattar, Dreher, and Thierstein 2018), calling for attention to the intrinsic value of culture beyond an instrumental approach (Crossick and Kaszynska 2016; Holden 2006; 2015). Among the critical discourses on culture-led development, cultural policy scholar Justin O'Connor (2024) argues that measuring success through aggregated economic outputs conceals the fact that multinational corporations are the primary beneficiaries and calls for a fundamental shift to see culture as a basic right rather than an industry. These literatures inform the motivation of this research, asking how cultural and urban development objectives can align to benefit local artists and communities. These questions underscore the need for a different framework to discuss urban cultural development as one that recognises the economic potential while foregrounding inclusivity, sustainability, and cultural production over spectacles and profit.

Towards Cultural Infrastructure: A Relational Framework

In the last decade, the concept of cultural infrastructure has emerged as an alternative to welfare-oriented cultural services or economically driven culture-led development. Drawing from social science literature, infrastructure is conceptualized as components, events, and movements that enable the functioning of a technical system (Star 1999). Like

pipes and cables for water service and electricity, infrastructure encompasses visible structure and invisible substrates, presenting a relational and spatial conception as "the matters that enable the movement of other matters" (Larkin 2013, 329). This approach shifts focus from appearance to functionality, prioritizing processes, networks, and spaces over isolated objects. In the context of culture-urban development, it redirects attention from iconic architecture and spectacles to the enabling conditions for cultural development, probing to ask "how it works" rather than "what it appears to be" (Easterling 2014). Addressing this knowledge gap in material substrates, relational processes, and networks (Mar 2023), the following analysis aims to identify the components and underlying systems of cultural functions and how they can facilitate cultural production, display, and participation.

In practice, the cultural infrastructure concept provides a framework for implementation, as global policymakers seek post-neoliberal cultural economy directions with increasing concerns about social value (Crossick and Kaszynska 2016). At the national, regional, or district scale, cities began conducting cultural mapping exercises to take stock of their built infrastructure and identify service gaps and areas at risk as a basis for policy recommendations and the development of strategies (Duxbury 2008; Evans and Foord 2008; GLA 2019). A recent edited volume by scholars in planning and geography provided a practice definition of cultural infrastructure, as a "combination of built facilities, practices, policy framework, institutional framework, and social media to support common localized urban culture" (Bain and Podmore 2023, 15), expanding the scope to include both built forms and the substrate of governance and operation. Another aspect that the current infrastructural discourse highlighting the production aspect of culture, rendered as the concept of "urban backstage" that study the condition that supports cultural production (Bingham-Hall and Kaasa 2019; Chua ed. 2021).

Adopting such perspective, this paper investigates how Hong Kong's cultural development is shaped by urban planning imperatives under different governance regimes and reveals the overlooked connections between cultural policy and spatial planning. The framework operationalize analysis across three dimensions: (1) Space and Typologies: the range of cultural development types from flagship institutions to municipal town halls and adaptive reuse projects; (2) Governance and Operation: the institutional model, funding mechanism, and administrative structures that supports cultural activities; (3) Spatial and Network Qualities: the territorial distribution, accessibility, and integration of cultural resources within broader urban development plans.

Historical Analysis: Intersection of Urban and Cultural Planning

With the conceptual framework of cultural infrastructure in mind, this research employs a methodological approach grounded in architectural history to analyse cultural development in Hong Kong across two main periods: the late-colonial welfare development period from the 1960s to the early 2000s, as cultural services gain importance in public policy discourse and are integrated into housing and urban development schemes; and from the 2000s to the present, shifting towards large-scale urban

infrastructure development (the Metroplan, 1984) and culture-led urban regeneration in the city-centre (Table 1). Over the past five decades, government investment and civic initiatives have transformed Hong Kong from a perceived "cultural desert" into a city with a rich array of cultural venues and spectacular events, yet whether these landmark cultural projects have effectively supported the local cultural sector remains debatable. While the development detail of these projects has been addressed elsewhere (Yiu 2024), the following analysis offers a nuanced reading of how they work together as an infrastructural network composed of diverse yet interdependent components.

Table 1. *Comparison of two periods*
Source: Designed by the author.

	1960s–2000: **Establishing Cultural Service**	**2000s–present:** **Culture as Developmental Instrument**
Spatial Typologies	Integrated Cultural Centre Complex, Town Halls, Municipal Civic Centres	Culture-themed mega-project, adaptive reuse and heritage projects
Urban Planning Context	Waterfront business and tourism centre masterplan, New Town Development	Strategic infrastructure plan, land reclamation, urban land value recapture
Institution & Governance	*Policy*: Urban Council (UrbCo) & Regional Council (RegCo) *Building & Construction*: Public Works Dept (PWD), New Territories Development Dept (NTDD) *Operation*: Urban Service Dept (USD) & Regional Servicer Dept (RSD)	*Policy*: Home Affairs Bureau (HAB), Development Bureau (DevB) *Building & Construction*: Architectural Service Department (ASD), open tender and international competition *Operation*: Leisure and Cultural Service Dept (LCSD)
Cultural Policy Purpose	Culture as welfare / to maintain social stability	Culture as economic driver / to build global city image
Cultural Policy Strategies	Amenity Planning, Public Investment, Funding and Patronage	Cultural Landmarks, Culture-led Development, Private-sector Funding

Operationalizing Cultural Infrastructure: Three Analytical Dimensions

Building upon the literature review that drew on work in infrastructure studies and architectural history, this paper conceptualises cultural infrastructure through three interrelated analytical dimensions: typologies of space and programme configuration, institutional governance and operations, and spatial network logics to examine how material and institutional setups enable or constrain cultural production, circulation, and participation.

Contemporary architectural discourse suggests that type and typology are social constructs that shape architectural forms (Vidler [1977] 2014), to be studied not as prescriptive categories but as analytical tools (Colquhoun 1969). This perspective is adopted to analyse cultural infrastructure as it condenses assumptions about the affective aspect of architectural space (scale, form, program) into reproducible types that can be multiplied, adapted, or hybridized. Reading cultural architecture as spatial and programmatic types is useful for analysing cultural planning practice, where they are replicable and adaptable

across different sites, while each type encodes a particular disposition towards cultural production and consumption. The premise of infrastructure is never purely material; it comprises institutional and governance structures, though much of it remains invisible to the end user. For cultural infrastructure, this includes funding mechanisms, oversight regimes, administrative hierarchies, and operational protocols that determine how spaces are programmed, who can access them, and on what terms. Star's notion of infrastructural work and Larkin's emphasis on the agency of "matter that enables the movement of other matter" highlight these institutional and governance underpinnings as constitutive of infrastructure rather than as external constraints. Therefore, the following analysis treats funding, ownership, and administrative arrangements as part of the infrastructural substrates of cultural facilities. Finally, cultural infrastructure operates as a spatial network rather than an ensemble of isolated buildings. The territorial distribution, density, and connectivity of venues—how they relate to housing, transport, commercial centres, and open space—shape the practical geographies of cultural life.

The following historical analysis uses these three dimensions—typology, governance, and spatial network—to examine how Hong Kong's cultural facilities have been configured across the different development periods, re-reading key cultural projects as components of an infrastructural system rather than discrete architectural objects.

1960s–2000: Establishing Cultural Service

During the late-colonial period from the 1960s to 1997, over a dozen public cultural facilities were constructed, laying the foundation of Hong Kong's cultural infrastructure that is still in use today. Since its organization reform in 1973, the Urban Council (UrbCo) has played a leading role in cultural service provision and implemented extensive cultural development projects. Rapid urban and economic growth provided the opportunity and resources to realize its ambitions, advancing Hong Kong's status as a global cultural city while fulfilling the needs of the growing population.

Space and Typologies: Metropolitan Landmark and Municipal Amenities

The cultural centres as a public building typology originates with the Hong Kong City Hall, inaugurated by Governor Robert Black in 1962 and described as "not only a cluster of government offices but also the centre of cultural and social life for the city."[1] It introduced an integrated cultural facility model that combined the program of concert hall, theatre, museum, library, marriage registry, and civic space. Designed in an austere post-war British public architecture idiom that prioritized functionality over monumentality, the City Hall served as a template for subsequent public cultural centres, and its spatial and programmatic configuration evolved into three typological transformations that adapt to different urban contexts and positioning. The Hong Kong Cultural Centre (HKCC) exemplifies the metropolitan landmark type, conceived in the context of Tsim Sha Tsui's redevelopment into a tourism and commercial district in the late 1970s. Occupying the

1 Hong Kong City Hall. 1962. "Governor's Opening Speech." *South China Morning Post*, Mar. 03, 1962.

5-hectare waterfront site, it comprises a collection of iconic buildings: an Auditorium Building with a grand theatre and a concert hall, an Art Museum, a Planetarium (now Space Museum), a public garden, and a waterfront promenade. It functions as the high-capacity cultural venue for major touring performances and the cultural landmark along the Kowloon harbourfront.

Building on the City Hall precedent, town halls were introduced in the suburban new towns, as part of MacLehose's welfare development agenda for a "balanced lifestyle" that includes leisure and cultural provision alongside housing and workplace (Yeh 2021). These town halls are built in the first-generation new towns in the New Territories, starting with Tsuen Wan in 1980, followed by Shatin and Tuen Mun in 1987. By directly adopting the concert hall and theatre design of City Hall to improve design and construction efficiency, these town halls share a similar spatial and programmatic configuration, including auditoria, exhibition areas, rehearsal studios, and seminar rooms. Planned under the New Territories Development Department within the wider new town planning strategies, these facilities present a standardized package for suburban centres, typically with adjacent civic plazas, commercial centres, and transport interchanges. The result is a replicable spatial-programmatic model for territorial cultural provision, enhancing access to cultural activities for new town residents in line with amenity-planning principles (Bristow 1989; Evans 2001).

In dense urban districts, scarcity of land resources led to a third typological solution—the compact civic centres integrated within multi-purpose municipal service buildings. These hybrid complexes combined public markets, sport facilities, and cultural programmes within a single multi-storey structure, with a smaller 400-seat auditorium complemented by rehearsal and exhibition spaces. The first prototype, the Ngau Chi Wan Civic Centre (1987), is sited next to a new public housing estate and the Choi Hung MTR station, illustrating how cultural functions were integrated into planned service nodes rather than allocated standalone sites. Designed by government architects in the Public Works Department under cost and efficiency constraints, these civic centres extended the cultural centre archetype into a compact, vertically stacked configuration that was later reproduced in other urban districts. The typologies developed from the City Hall precedent demonstrated how the spatial and programmatic logic could be scaled, adapted, and recombined. Their replicability and transferability are crucial to understanding them not as individual buildings but as components of an emergent cultural infrastructure, a point to be further developed in the discussion section.

Governance and Operation: The Two Councils and Technocratic Cultural Service

Governance and operation of cultural centres in this period illustrate a relatively coherent substrate of "soft" infrastructure. Following organisational reforms in 1973, the Urban Council (UrbCo) assumed responsibility for cultural services in the urban area in Hong Kong Island and Kowloon, while the Regional Council (RegCo) was established in 1986 to govern cultural and leisure facilities in the New Territories. The government provided the capital investment for construction and handed it over to the municipal councils for

programme and operations. Particularly for the UrbCo, with an aspiration to put Hong Kong on the global cultural map and the budgetary autonomy and healthy earnings from rates, they became the primary funder of cultural activities and professional arts development in the city, essentially democratising cultural access for residents. Both councils commissioned facilities, set programming priorities, and oversaw operations through their executive arms, the Urban Service Department and Regional Service Department, managing the cultural venues as public amenities comparable to parks, libraries, and sports grounds.

Operationally, town halls and civic centres were managed as neutral venues for hire, with performance evaluated mainly through attendance and rental income. This technocratic approach de-emphasised ideological notions of cultural policy, aligning with colonial strategies to avoid contentious identity politics (Lee 2013), but it nonetheless provided stable, subsidised infrastructure for a growing local cultural sector. The program selection of the municipal cultural centres included international touring productions as well as local forms such as Cantonese opera, community concerts, and amateur exhibitions, gradually broadening the social base of cultural participation, even if more experimental practices remained marginal. The two-council structure introduced both fragmentation and productive competition. UrbCo and RegCo developed relatively distinct cultural agendas shaped by their constituencies, yet they shared a common welfare-service rationale and occasionally collaborated on major events such as the Hong Kong Arts Festival. Although the new towns urbanised rapidly and there is no clear urban-rural divide in Hong Kong, this arrangement generated parallel networks with overlapping territorial coverage, which contribute to the resiliency of public cultural provision but limit the emergence of a single, territory-wide cultural policy vision.

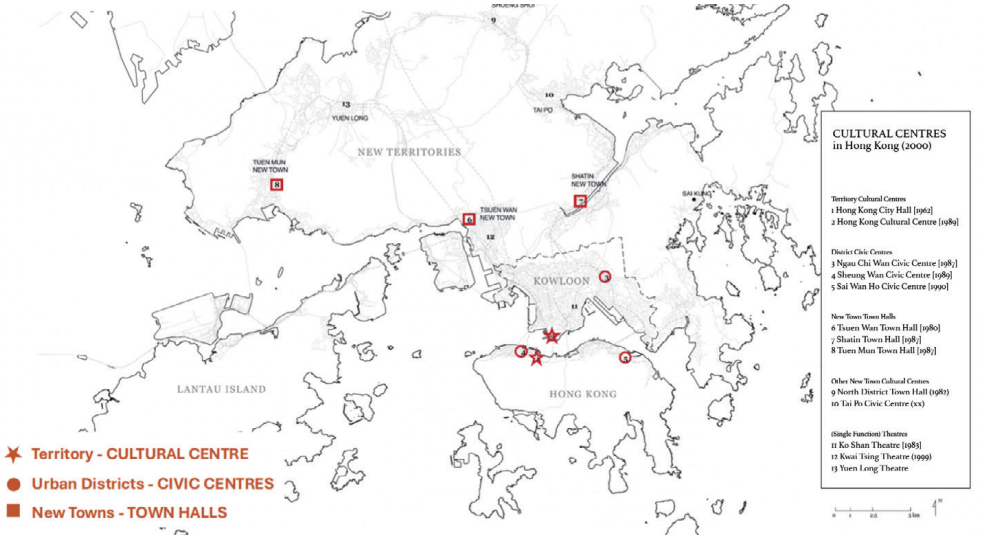
Spatial Network Quality: Amenity Distribution and the Cultural Infrastructure Foundation

Spatially, the resulting network resembles a hierarchical amenity system with a clear territorial logic that dissipates from the city centre outwards to the new towns, as illustrated in Figure 1. Metropolitan cultural nodes such as the City Hall and HKCC anchored the harbourfront in Central and Tsim Sha Tsui, while regional town halls distributed in the New Territories to establish regional cultural hubs in new town centres such as Tsun Wan, Shatin, and Tuen Mun as well as distant market towns in Tai Po and Shueng Shui. Meanwhile, smaller civic centres infilled dense urban districts near large public housing estates and transport nodes. This distribution aligns with demographic and planning priorities, serving growth areas and supporting new town development, as amenity planning to allocate cultural resources rather than presenting a dedicated cultural vision for the whole territory. Nonetheless, the result is relatively even geographic access to publicly funded venues across the territory, which forms the basic infrastructure for the city's cultural development in the decades to come.

The amenity-planning approach meant that cultural facilities were sited and scaled according to projected population catchments and service standards, echoing the

provision of local schools, clinics, and parks. While such cultural planning is subordinated to broader urban development objectives, it also ensures that cultural resources are not confined to the urban core but are distributed to local districts. It should be noted that the urban and New Territories administrators have different agendas for planning their cultural facilities. For example, UrbCo's conception of the Civic Centre was an ambition to be replicated in all districts in Hong Kong that transcended the two-councils divide, while the pre-RegCo conception of Town Halls by the New Territory Development Department was a pragmatic public amenity plan for new towns with little elaboration on its role in cultural development. The 1960s-2000 period thus established a welfare-oriented cultural infrastructure characterised by standardized typologies, technocratic public governance, and a territorially dispersed network, laying the groundwork for Hong Kong's emerging local cultural sector but with limitations that would be challenged by post-2000 development and market-oriented models.

Figure 1. *Distribution of Municipal Cultural Centres before 2000.*
Source: Designed by the author.



2000s–Present: Culture as a Developmental Instrument

After the sovereignty change in 1997 and the dissolution of the two councils in 1999, responsibility for public cultural services was transferred to the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD), with strategic cultural policy centralized under the Home Affairs Bureau (HAB). It signifies a paradigm shift in which cultural development became an operational task rather than a publicly discussed policy agenda, with more exclusive consultation with selected cultural sector leaders. Meanwhile, the focus of urban development has shifted from new town expansion to large-scale infrastructure and urban regeneration. The late 1980s Metroplan and the Port and Airport Development Strategy, publicly known as the "Rose Garden" project, entailed extensive reclamation in West

Kowloon and major transport development well into the 2000s, while the city centre faces intensified redevelopment pressure amid a highly speculative real-estate market. Within the local imperatives of post-industrial urban development and fuelled by the emerging global cultural economy discourse, culture was explicitly repositioned as a driver of economic growth. It signals a departure from the social welfare investment into a market-driven approach, setting the stage for mega-projects such as the West Kowloon Cultural District and hybrid conservation-cum-development schemes like "Conserving Central."

Space and Typologies: The Mega-Project and Heritage Regeneration

This period is defined by two new cultural space typologies: the mega-project represented by the West Kowloon Cultural District (WKCD), and the adaptive reuse of heritage buildings under the "Conserving Central" scheme. From the early 2000s onward, Hong Kong's cultural development took the form of large emblematic projects and strategic adaptive-reuse schemes, contrasting with the welfare-provision emphasis on standardized, distributed amenities. Announced in the first HKSAR Policy Address in 1998, the West Kowloon Cultural District (WKCD) is the clearest example of the mega-project typology. With multiple iterations and heated debates since its conception and early development proposals, the project eventually settled in 2016 on a master plan comprising over a dozen cultural facilities, extensive waterfront public space, and a commercial mixed-use program on the 40-hectare reclaimed site. Rather than replicating the cultural centre models across the territory, WKCD concentrates multiple high-capacity venues, including various theatres, music halls, museums, public parks, and outdoor performance spaces into a single destination that dwarfs all the cultural facilities built in Hong Kong. Set out to be the spectacular icon designed by world-famous architects, the mega-project typology of a clustered cultural district is positioned for global visibility and tourism attraction as much as for local cultural use, as a culture-led development that regards culture as an economic catalyst for larger urban development objectives.

In parallel, the "Conserving Central" scheme introduced another type of cultural project with a commercial programme embedded within the adaptive reuse of heritage buildings. Launched by the Development Bureau in 2009, the scheme identified eight buildings with heritage value in Central, including the Police Married Quarters (PMQ), Central Police Station Compound (Tai Kwun), Central Market, Murray Building, and others, as part of a conservation-cum-development initiative. Instead of purpose-built central centres, these projects transformed existing institutional and commercial structures into hybrid spaces that mix exhibition, performance, creative industry studios, retail, and hospitality functions. The largest project within this scheme, the Central Harbourfront new construction, is situated on reclaimed land with no direct relation to heritage conservation or cultural development, while other projects incorporate various degrees of adaptive reuse with cultural and commercial functions. These projects were conceived with a vague overarching vision and minimal programmatic or spatial relationship. To a certain extent, it could be read as a publicity scheme to package isolated development projects, including some controversial ones, under a unified image of a

culture-and-heritage cause for better public appeal.

As a spatial and programmatic typology, both WCKD and Conserving Central differ from earlier cultural centres in three ways. First, they explicitly link cultural development to tourism, city branding, and real estate opportunity rather than to public service amenity standards. Second, they rely on site-specific design instead of a standard formal type, making them less replicable across districts. Third, they embed cultural functions in mixed-use environments interwoven with retail, dining, and hospitality programmes intended to capture visitor spending. These choices foreground the priority in utilising culture as a site for landmark image projection and experiential consumption, shifting away from the citizen accessibility and distributive logics that characterized the earlier welfare-oriented cultural development.

Governance and Operation: Public-Private Partnership and Commodified Culture

The governance arrangement underpinning these projects marks a clear departure from the two-council public service model towards public-private partnerships and civic-initiated cultural development projects. Although the WKCD proposal was portrayed as a response to local cultural sector needs involving local cultural practitioners, the core discussion of the WKCD development was still pivoted around tourism and real estate potential. The development project was initially conceived as a public-private partnership in which a single developer consortium would fund and build cultural facilities in exchange for extensive commercial development rights. Public criticism of the profit-driven tender and the initial design led to a halt in 2006, and the development model was eventually changed to a government endowment model with HKD 20 billion in capital construction, managed by the statutory WKCD Authority (WKCDA). While the single-developed model was revoked, the WKCDA's mandate to achieve long-term financial sustainability requires that venue rental and commercial leasing generate recurrent income after the exhaustion of the endowment, effectively embedding market requirements into its operations. The higher ticket prices at WKCD venues, substantial on-site retail and dining program, and the preference for popular productions reflect this commodified culture logic. When viewed in conjunction with the adjacent luxury shopping mall and the condominiums completed and sold during the early debates and delays, it demonstrates the real estate-driven character of urban/cultural development in Hong Kong and raises questions about who the actual beneficiaries are. Nowadays, with more relaxed regulations on leisure and entertainment activities and abundant consumer outlets, the WKCD has become a popular arts-themed destination, presenting a new but debatable model of culture-led development.

The Conserving Central projects, while smaller in scale, also rely on different public-private partnerships or philanthropic funding. For example, Central Market was renovated by the Urban Renewal Authority and later tendered to commercial operators; Tai Kwun is run as an independent non-profit cultural institution with capital from the philanthropy, Jockey Club; PMQ is overseen by the government-affiliated creative industry promotion agency, CreateHK (now the Cultural and Creative Industries Development

Agency (CCIDA)). Proposed by the HKSAR Development Bureau in 2009, the Conserving Central scheme was a testing ground for different development models of heritage building regeneration, reiterates the argument that cultural development in Hong Kong is overshadowed by economy-driven urban planning. Across these cases, adaptive reuse of heritage buildings becomes both a cultural opportunity and a development instrument —the plot-ratio transfer mechanism and premium central locations make these projects attractive for real-estate valorisation, while cultural and creative uses serve to legitimise redevelopment and attract visitors. Financial viability through retail leases, events, and branded experience has become a central operational concern that inevitably dictates programme choice and accessibility.

Compared with the earlier period, cultural governance is now plural and fragmented, involving statutory authorities, government departments, quasi-governmental agencies, philanthropic foundations, and private operators. This diversification has enabled experimentation with new institutional models and programming strategies but has also weakened the notion of culture as a universal public service. Cultural venues are increasingly expected to justify themselves through revenue generation, visitor numbers, and branding impacts, reinforcing the utility of culture for broader economic objectives. This form of governance and operations introduced new market-driven logics into the cultural sector, where financial sustainability often takes precedence over artistic experimentation or community access. However, on a positive note, it has also contributed to the city's cultural infrastructure with various small- and medium-scale cultural spaces that suggest alternative models and have become popular cultural venues today.

Spatial Network Quality: Centralised Cluster and Fragmented Network

In contrast to the more coordinated public investment in the late-colonial cultural amenity model, post-2000 cultural development produces a spatial network that comprises multiple fragmented projects with varying development objectives and outcomes. WKCD concentrates a critical mass of high-profile venues along the West Kowloon waterfront, adjacent to the regional transportation hub (high-speed rail and Airport Express) and to new private residential and commercial developments. At the same time, the Conserving Central projects cluster cultural and creative spaces in the historic core of Hong Kong Island, reinforcing Central's role as a premium business and tourism district. Together, these initiatives generate two major cultural clusters in West Kowloon and Central, while many pre-existing public cultural buildings, including the now subordinated HKCC, town halls, and civic centres, continue to operate in local districts with comparatively modest investment and visibility.

This spatial centralisation reflects a shift from the amenity-planning logic of allocating facilities according to population growth and equalised distribution to strategies of land-value capture, global city branding, and tourism development. Including the flagship project of the WKCD, these government-supported projects rely on private funding and operations that are essentially speculative. The spatial network of Conserving Central projects reflects the entanglement of cultural planning with the property market,

while each independent operation varies in artistic direction and institutional vision. Concentrating cultural venues in already high-value, well-connected districts amplifies their potential to attract visitors, stimulate the adjacent property market, and reinforce Hong Kong's global-city image. However, it also risks exacerbating spatial inequalities, as peripheral districts depend on ageing facilities and have fewer opportunities for new cultural investments. The network becomes denser in the core while remaining thin elsewhere, with limited mechanisms for coordination or resource sharing across different operators.

At the same time, beyond the above cases, the last two decades have seen a proliferation of independent and civic cultural spaces, such as artist-run studios, small theatres, and non-profit cultural centres, including the JCCAC in Shek Kip Mei and The Mills in Tsuen Wan, which operate with varying degrees of government funding support. These venues often occupy converted industrial or commercial buildings and form localized micro-networks around specific art forms or communities. Their presence complicates the picture of a purely top-down, mega-project cultural planning outlook—while the flagship clusters in West Kowloon and Central represent highly visible cultural infrastructure, a more fragmented and informal layer of small and medium-scale spaces underpins everyday cultural production and participation across the city with a level of resiliency that would deserve more discussion and future research.

Overall, the 2000s-present period is characterized by a dual spatial logic: concentrated, highly capitalised cultural clusters in central locations designed as developmental instruments, and a dispersed, largely independent ecology of smaller spaces that provide more modest yet potentially more agile forms of cultural infrastructure. This configuration underscores how culture has become tightly interwoven with urban development and real estate strategies, while also revealing the potential and vulnerability of less conspicuous infrastructural components that sustain local cultural life beyond the landmark projects.

Discussion: Cultural Development Through an Infrastructural Lens

Three decades of active public construction in Hong Kong during the late-colonial period have produced a portfolio of cultural facilities, further enriched in recent decades by mega-projects and diverse small- to medium-scale venues. The historical analysis shows that Hong Kong's cultural development cannot be adequately understood through architectural form or policy discourse alone, with a pressing need to bring cultural and urban planning into a common discussion platform. Across both periods, cultural facilities operate as infrastructural systems whose spatial-programmatic configurations, governance arrangements, and network logics together shape which cultural practices become feasible, for whom, and where. Drawing on urban infrastructural studies, this section reinterprets the empirical material to clarify how cultural and urban development objectives intersect, diverge, and conflict, using the cultural infrastructure lens first as an analytical tool to understand its function, then as a project tool to envision a possible future in cultural-urban policy that supports cultural production and participation as much as display and consumption.

Cultural Infrastructure as Embedded, Relational, and Ecological

The characterisation of infrastructure as "embedded in other structures, social arrangements, and technologies" by Star (1999) highlights that cultural facility development is inseparable from broader social conditions and market systems. In the late-colonial period, cultural centres were embedded in a wider apparatus of social welfare, housing provision, and new town development. Town halls and civic centres were co-located with other public services such as libraries, markets, or sports facilities, and were managed as amenities within the technocratic practice of the Urban and Regional Service Departments. They formed part of the same planning rationale as schools, clinics, and parks, distributed by population growth and resettlement priorities, becoming a normalised component of everyday urban life. While this network contributed to democratising cultural access, it also reproduced operational logic inherited in state bureaucracy as standardised design, quantitative performance metrics, and centralised management—even in the HKCC as a singular case, remained embedded in the public-service system without developing a distinct artistic identity (Yiu 2025).

In the post-2000 period, cultural venues became embedded in strategic urban infrastructure projects and urban regeneration schemes, reflecting a shift to land-value recapture, tourism, and city branding as dominant logics. These cultural facilities are coupled with large-scale development and real estate speculation, which impose distinct planning and operational requirements. While WKCD has been under constant scrutiny for its economically driven nature, the Conserving Central scheme also emphasizes revenue-generating components and premium pricing, even though individual projects have demonstrated clear branding identity and potential for artistic experimentation. Seen from this perspective, cultural infrastructure is relational and ecological, with each project or place having different meanings and functions for different stakeholders, and these meanings can change as funding mechanisms, governance arrangements, and urban development priorities evolve. Cultural managers of public venues operate within bureaucratic protocols; artists and producers navigate the system to secure resources and spaces; residents and visitors encounter venues as leisure destinations or symbolic landmarks. A town hall may appear as a generic performance venue to occasional visitors, but it functions as a critical resource for local arts production; WKCD can be experienced as a weekend leisure space, a global exhibition platform, or a speculative real-estate anchor, depending on one's position. Recognizing this embedded, multi-perspectival character of cultural infrastructure helps explain why cultural and urban policy is a site of persistent contestation, and why purely programmatic or symbolic reading of cultural projects tends to miss key dynamics among different actors.

Cultural Infrastructure as Active Forms

This study focuses on the built environment shaped by cultural policy vision and urban planning imperatives, which can be discussed as what Easterling called "infrastructural space" that is composed of active relational components (1999; 2014). The two periods

exhibit distinct logics that can be interpreted through Easterling's notion of "active form"—spatial arrangements guided by invisible protocols and rules that generate recurring effects, with conceptual tools such as multiplier, switch, and interplay that are generative by design. Distinct from the complementary "object form" of physical structure, these active forms are intangible structures that produce dispositions or tendencies that encourage or deter certain cultural forms or practices.

In the late-colonial period, municipal cultural facilities were built upon an implicit protocol of time and cost efficiency. With the established typology of programme mix, spatial organisation, and service standard, they could be multiplied and adapted across the territory, in the form of standalone town halls in new towns or stacked civic centres in dense urban districts. These replicable typologies, or "multipliers" in Easterling's term, encoded a disposition towards standardisation, broad territorial coverage, and a neutral "venue for hire" operation that privileged established art forms and quantitative indicators, aligning with the amenity-planning principle and public-service ethos. By contrast, WKCD and Conserving Central embody a non-replicable, site-specific typology centred on clustering, singularity, and evolving programme. WKCD is a cluster of multiple venues within a bounded site, combining star-architect buildings with indoor-outdoor spaces that can accommodate different cultural or commercial events. The heritage adaptive-reuse projects each develop a unique spatial configuration tied to specific building fabric and urban contexts. These typologies encode a different disposition that foregrounds iconicity, destination value, and commercial integration, which can be read as the active form of "switch" that enables a turn from one condition to another—from the public service orientation to a global image-building objective.

At the same time, the infrastructural lens reveals the active form of "interplay" that establishes an interdependent relationship between variables. In WKCD, the roster of auditoria, rehearsal spaces, galleries, and studios across multiple venues constitutes a modular resource base that can be rearranged and combined under coordinated management. In principle, rehearsal spaces within the grand theatre designed for high-standard productions could also serve as incubation spaces for smaller or experimental work. Similarly, the distributed network of town halls and civic centres contains latent capacity for more locally rooted and diverse creative uses than their original programming implies. Both sets of typologies and governance structures can thus function as enabling infrastructure to support a variety of cultural practices beyond the prescribed program. Understanding them as active forms underscores that improving cultural infrastructure is not only a matter of building new venues but also of redesigning the protocols and rules that govern existing spaces, which is central to this paper's argument for an infrastructural thinking in cultural policy. At the same time, the infrastructural lens reveals the active form of "interplay" that establishes an interdependent relationship between variables. In WKCD, the roster of auditoria, rehearsal spaces, galleries, and studios across multiple venues constitutes a modular resource base that can be rearranged and combined under coordinated management. In principle, rehearsal spaces within the grand theatre designed for high-standard

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Implications of Cultural Infrastructure Substrates

Governance as the underlying operation logic—the substrate—of cultural infrastructure can also be read through the comparison of the two-council model and post-2000 institutional variety. The former centralised public-service mandates provided relative insulation from short-term market pressure, enabled some redundancy and resilience through overlapping council networks. Meanwhile, although the fragmented operation of contemporary cultural projects adheres to market logic, it allows ambitious institutions the freedom to explore and support experimentation with commercial surplus. Reading governance and operation as an infrastructural substrate thus reveals continuities beneath apparent policy changes. In both periods, cultural development remained subordinate to broader urban and economic imperatives, from social welfare management to real estate competition, although the specific metrics and actors have changed. The cultural infrastructure framework makes this subordination visible, and crucially, provides a vocabulary for debating alternative arrangements that could rebalance public, civic, and market roles.

The infrastructural analysis of spatial networks highlights a shift from dispersed amenities to clustered districts coupled with fragmented independent ecologies. In the 1960s-2000 configuration, metropolitan nodes at the harbourfront, regional town hall hubs in new towns, and civic centre spokes in dense urban districts created a hierarchical hub-and-spoke system. This pattern supported relatively even geographic access and integrated cultural facilities into everyday life, even though it limits differentiation by concentrating prestige in central venues. The post-2000 configuration doubles down on centrality, with WKCD and Conserving Central projects intensifying cultural resource density in West Kowloon and Central, while municipal cultural centres continue to operate with modest upgrades in other districts. At the same time, small and medium-scale independent spaces such as artist studios, non-profit art centres, and live houses have proliferated in industrial and mixed-use areas across the territory. The result is a dual network of highly visible, capital-intensive clusters in core areas and a dispersed, often precarious layer of smaller venues that underpin local production and participation.

This duality matters because it challenges the assumption that investing in flagship projects automatically strengthens the cultural ecosystem. Crossick and Kaszynska's work on the intrinsic value of culture (2016) and Mar's synthesis of cultural infrastructure

research (2023) suggest that networks of small spaces often prove more socially resilient than landmark projects dependent on heavy public or commercial investments. In Hong Kong, this points towards the advocacy of infrastructural thinking that considers not only the building of major facilities but also the connective tissue—affordable rehearsal spaces, community hubs, independent venues, and even digital platforms—through which culture is produced and shared.

Towards Infrastructural Thinking in Cultural Policy

The infrastructural lens reveals cultural facilities as embedded and relational systems, as active forms, and as networks that shape possibilities for cultural development over time. Taken together, these insights suggest that a city's cultural policy debate would benefit from shifting its focus from individual projects and programmes to system design, aiming at a future that identifies and strengthens existing resources as much as it builds new ones. Besides evidence that networks of smaller cultural spaces show greater resilience than reliance on one-off large investments, recent research advocates for an infrastructural approach in cultural development that focuses on spatial and functional conditions, enabling production and participation rather than architectural spectacle.

In this light, the paper's proposal can be summarised as three interlinked strategies. First, shifting from landmark constructions to strategic infill. This means de-prioritising new mega-projects and instead investing in a diverse ecology of spaces to build a robust, varied landscape of cultural producers that supports the entire creative chain. Second, establishing networked governance that transcends institutional boundaries. It is an opportunity for Hong Kong's new Culture, Sports, and Tourism Bureau (CSTB) to lead a change in transforming the top-down decision maker role to become a system-level facilitator, bringing together institutions of various scales for coordinated programming and resource sharing for a greater whole than the sum of its fragmented parts. Third, spatial mapping and planning for equitable distribution. A key application of the cultural infrastructure framework is a comprehensive mapping of cultural-spatial resources, including public, private, and informal cultural display and production venues. This data-driven approach makes visible the infrastructural substrates and can be utilized for strategic planning towards a more inclusive and equitable cultural infrastructure. International examples such as the Greater London Authority's Cultural Infrastructure Plan demonstrate how mapping and cross-sector coordination can underpin targeted, system-oriented policy. A similar approach in Hong Kong could rebalance support between centralised clusters and neighbourhood-level resources and align cultural and urban planning as mutually reinforcing strategies rather than parallel or competing agendas.

Conclusion

This paper examines the intricate relationship between cultural planning and urban development objectives, regardless of scale or governance, through the lens of cultural

infrastructure. The approach not only recasts how Hong Kong's cultural development is understood but also fundamentally reframes what cultural policy should aim to achieve. Rather than viewing the construction of cultural landmarks as an endpoint, the goal of sustainable cultural development should lie in the infrastructure that supports cultural production and participation. The value of culture cannot be reduced to the quantitative account of economic outputs or attendance metrics but encompasses wider societal impact, as international scholarship already recognises culture as the fourth pillar of sustainable development (British Council 2020) and calls for inclusion into the post-2030 UNSDG framework. This study of Hong Kong's cultural development since the late 20th century through an infrastructural lens has revealed how it has been shaped by, and at times subordinated to, economy-oriented urban development imperatives. This is not a local anomaly but part of a wider pattern found in global cities, especially in Asia, facing similar developmental pressures and social-political challenges, where Hong Kong's trajectory could offer constructive insights for navigating the tension between cultural development and urban growth. The cultural infrastructure framework, as developed in this paper, provides a model for reimaging culture-urban development as integrated and mutually reinforcing, through rich typologies, flexible governance, and networked systems that support not only cultural consumption but, critically, production and participation.

Looking ahead, the most impactful strategies will be those that prioritise resilient systems over iconic objects, as suggested in this paper, the three strategies of planning cultural development as infrastructure. This means investing in the cultural infrastructure substrates that enable inclusive cultural production and collaborative networks to support local growth with equitable opportunities across the city. It involves seeing governance not as top-down allocation but as the construction of an infrastructure for collective action, enabling new forms of resource-sharing, planning, and support across institutional and disciplinary boundaries. The recent publication of the *Blueprint for Arts, Culture and Creative Industries Development* (2024) provides a timely window to rethink cultural planning that engages with its past while envisioning alternative futures, positioning Hong Kong to become a regional leader in infrastructural cultural policy with a model for Asia and beyond. As we anticipate economic and political uncertainties in Hong Kong and globally over the coming decades, there is a need to move from the reliance on large-scale public investment or speculative real estate development and to reconsider adaptive, sustainable urban cultural strategies. The question would no longer be whether we need more cultural landmarks, but rather what kinds of infrastructure are needed, and how urban development can support their cultivation. This paper, therefore, calls on policymakers, planners, and cultural practitioners in Hong Kong and across Asia to embrace cultural infrastructure not only as a descriptive concept or analytical tool, but as a transformative framework for policy and practice, designing systems that enable culture to flourish as a shared urban resource rather than a by-product of development.

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