

A Community's Loss

I live close to the upper sections of the mid-levels escalators. It is a very convenient place to live with easy access to Central. There are many restaurants further down the escalators that add to the character of this small part of Hong Kong Island. However, one of my favourite places is a coffee shop at the top end of the escalators in Robinson Road. This small shop serves an excellent coffee and offers a tasty range of snacks and hot food. The coffee shop is small but has comfortable chairs and free Wi-Fi; a bonus for many customers. The shop is always full and finding a place to sit is often difficult. Sometimes people bring their dogs inside adding a certain character to the place.

At least that was the case until late October when sadly the coffee shop closed. It came as quite a shock to all the customers although we probably ought to have seen it coming. A notice posted on the window thanked all the patrons for their support over the years. It also stated that the owners could no longer afford to pay the rent. Although a successful and profitable small business it could no longer find the money for the soaring rents charged by the landlord. After a week of saying 'goodbye' to customers the coffee shop closed its doors for the last time.

This was not the first time that a shop had closed in this part of the mid-levels. Over the past two years I have seen the demise of a newspaper and magazine shop, a flower shop, a shop selling Italian food products, a video shop and a dry cleaning shop. They were not large businesses but simple shops strung out along the street below apartment blocks. There are no shopping centres in this part of the mid-levels meaning that the shops dotted along the streets provide an important service to the hundreds of people who live above.

Yet still more shops are at risk of closure. I predict that the cake shop will be the next to close followed by the curtain shop. This will mean that only Wellcome, Park-n-Shop, Manning's and 7-Eleven will remain open. So why are these shops closing? Who can afford to pay the soaring rents that the landlords are demanding? The answer is clear for all to see. The shops have been taken over by Property Agents selling the apartments that are consuming all available space in the mid-levels.

These new shops in my community share certain common characteristics. They are all painted in the Property Agents' colours. Some are blue and white, others green and gold others black and yellow. They are brightly lit with every centimetre of their glass windows used to advertise the apartments for sale and lease. The uniformity does not stop with the design and appearance of these real estate shops. It also extends to the people they employ. Many spend hours sitting at computers seemingly busy entering and accessing important data on apartment availability and potential clients. If not inside the shops the property agencies' workers are standing on the footpath waiting for something to happen. The overwhelming majority are young men under thirty years of age. They always wear black or shiny coloured suits although rarely with a tie. They all have iphones and spend many hours sending text messages. Many smoke although this might be related more to the boredom they are experiencing with their jobs rather than any attachment they might have to cigarettes. Without exception, however, they all block the footpaths to local residents simply trying to get to the few remaining shops in the neighbourhood.

I enjoy going for a brisk walk after school. Last week I decided to count the number of shops now operated by property agents along a two hundred metre stretch of one road in the mid-levels. I counted 14 shops. Incomprehensible to me was the fact that six of the shops were owned by the same property company. Why would one company need or even want so many outlets in the same street? The answer of course is simple; there is clearly a demand and the world of real estate is big business in Hong Kong.

But at what cost? What happens to local communities when neighbourhood shops close their doors? The problem in areas like the mid-levels where I live is that while the number of shops is declining the population is increasing. Older styled housing units, often only four or five floors in height are being demolished and replaced by high rise towers. A residential community that at one time had only a few dozen people now accommodates many hundreds. Many streets have become barren wastelands of apartment blocks but with no local services. Residents must now leave the area to go shopping, to go to the bank, to hire a DVD, to buy a newspaper or to have a cup of coffee.

The impact on the community is very real indeed. Local residents are no longer able to sit in coffee shops and chat to each other or to tourists who happen to call in. People can no longer pass the time of day talking with shop owners about local issues or scandals. In short, people no longer know each other. In a city like Hong Kong, where people work long hours and arrive home exhausted at the end of the day, it is important that they have an opportunity to communicate with others who live nearby. Imagine what it would be like here at school if there was no canteen, nowhere to sit, no table tennis tables, no basketball court, no lower playground, no prefects' or SA room, no gymnasium, no library or no chapel. Imagine what it would be like if there were only classrooms and laboratories in which you would spend your days. Life would be very boring if you were not able to talk to or have fun with classmates.

We all need family and friends. We need to communicate not only with the people we know but also with strangers. Turning our streets into places that lack character and human interaction is not healthy for anybody.

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