

# Visualizing the Community: Art and Design Tools for Social Changes

*King-chung SIU,  
sdking@polyu.edu.hk  
School of Design, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University*

## Abstract

In the midst of urban re-development in Hong Kong, our communities and vernacular cultures are being uprooted. It is against this background that an independent curatorial group – the Community Museum Project (CMP) – initiated the *Street as Museum* series of projects to explore, visualize and disseminate certain intangible heritages and indigenous knowledge. The CMP does not work under the museum proper, with its elitist collection, but works together with concerned communities to represent and articulate the pressing issues behind our livelihood practices and everyday negotiations amidst incessant city gentrification. The method involves “scavenging,” to interpret, visualize and showcase the city’s spectacles, personal anecdotes, vernacular artifacts and the wealth of community relations in our public culture. Employing methodologies in art and design, these social issues are given new visual, material and community forms. By design, these projects not only facilitate “communities of practice” (Wenger, 2006) via public participation and cross-disciplinary collaboration, they are also a useful community platform for articulating under-represented histories, indigenous creativity and everyday culture. As such, they have become a visual and political focus for healthy debate, civic engagement and learning, and perhaps, social innovation.

**KEYWORDS:** Communities of practice, Cultural scavenging, Photo-stocktaking, Social curating, Community visualization

## Introduction

The incessant urban re-development projects launched by the Urban Renewal Authority and real estate developers in Hong Kong have been razing our local neighborhoods, grassroots communities and vernacular cultures. It is against this background that a curatorial collective, the Community Museum Project (CMP, with which the author is affiliated), was founded, with the aim to use museum methodologies such as collecting, interpreting, displaying and disseminating, to undertake “cultural scavenging” projects. Through the process of collecting and curating, the CMP finds “visualizing the community” a useful tool for generating not only community spectacles, but also community activism and social change. For the CMP, the essence of museum practice is collecting and curating, and ultimately the legitimization of certain social values via proper museum showmanship. It was through the following museum projects that the CMP began to discover

approaches for bringing issues of community concern to public attention, thus helping to legitimize the practices and values of our under-represented common cultures. It is believed that “museum methods,” when applied to a broader socio-cultural context such as a city or street, may become a useful tool to allow legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in social learning and to effect changes among people, the mass media, and even the social dynamics in urban settings.

This paper attempts to share the questions and insights that the CMP has gathered from its projects, including how urban communities should be understood, and how local knowledge and the indigenous cultures of common folk can be preserved or re-generated in the midst of city gentrification. The strategy treats the city as a museum, in which artifacts, people and stories of livelihood practices are identified, documented, visualized and curated into exhibition spectacles, if not community platforms for public discourse. This allows the designers and the concerned communities to gain a better understanding of the probable socio-cultural practices of whatever informal community takes place in response to coercion (Ibid, 1991. p. 64).

## **The Community Museum Project and Cultural Scavenging**

It must be clarified from the outset that the Community Museum Project is not a museum *per se*, but a curatorial collective that runs museum projects. Instead of administering a museum institution with its hardware and proper collection, the CMP chooses to work opportunistically and independently of the formal museum profession. It uses “museum” as a tactical metaphor, a method to engage “museologically” in the articulation of everyday spectacles, vernacular cultures and community values through its curatorial endeavors. From the CMP’s point of view, the things to be collected need not be the pricey artifacts that most museums aspire to, they can be something as intangible as people’s networks or social relations, or as ephemeral as, say, certain cultural spectacles on a street, which remain unattended by most people, if not museum curators. From here comes the metaphor of cultural scavenging to which the CMP is committed. Assuming the role of a cultural scavenger, the project picks up what others have left behind in the street (and our culture) and makes something out of it. The CMP, therefore, sets out with the mission to do things that formal museum establishments may be unable or reluctant to do, such as collecting the “un-collectable,” giving up the collection after the project is accomplished, or collecting something that is yet to exist, as the following examples will show. Having said that, the CMP does follow a general museum’s undertakings to collect, research, interpret, display and communicate. Such endeavors have subsequently taken form in a series of exhibitions, publications and community engagement projects that have brought public attention to the knowledge and practical wisdom of the under-represented and grassroots communities in our city.

## Identifying Communities

Where, though, is the community in question, and how does the CMP find it? A community is a conceptual entity, intangible in the sense that one can hardly *see* it or define its boundaries and characteristics, until something happens to identify it or give it a name. It only becomes apparent when its members engage in some activity, or when something is deliberately brought forth in certain visual forms. For example, during the June Fourth massacre in 1989, the people of Hong Kong became a big political community – via large-scale street demonstrations and media critiques – in support of the pro-democratic student movement in Beijing. Similarly, the 500 thousand citizens who dressed all in black for the July First demonstration in 2003 provided a visual expression of their opposition to the enactment of Article 23 of the HKSAR Basic Law.

As obvious as these cases are, it is still difficult to identify clearly these people as communities, be they geographical, ideological or functional. A community may be identified merely as an imagined category, or as a figure of speech, but seeing our cultures expressed “museologically” or in curatorial themes may help to concretize our imaginations. Artifacts and exhibits can sometimes help to visualize or even enact certain characteristics and practices of a community. However, this could mean embracing a different articulation of the issue: perhaps a community can only be identified by what we make apparent as a thematic category of public knowledge and showmanship. It is perhaps in this sense that objects, people and visual displays, which are curated and seen together in the form of designated exhibitions or public events, could become necessary visual platforms that signify the community in question. Here, I try to see communities as something manifested through certain community spectacles, collected and curated through our museum endeavors.

## Collecting the ephemeral and “un-collectable”

In Hong Kong, the redevelopment of old districts – or urban gentrification – is very much a top-down agenda of society in general. Although the authorities claim to be taking a people-oriented approach in their renewal programs, there are still underlying negative assumptions about the old districts and their communities as being “poor and messy”, and the residents’ way of life is seen as obsolete and in need of “regeneration” with “new standards” of living. Mainstream society, driven by realty developers and the government, often ignores or even casts off the living materials, conditions and values, not to mention the invaluable traditions and cultures, of the grassroots.

In this light, the idea of cultural scavenging could become an essential strategy for our society to reclaim its disappearing common cultures, and hence to reinstate the cultural richness of the

communities under threat. It is under such circumstances that the author, in the name of the Community Museum Project and together with students and the community concerned, initiated these projects, treating the street as a museum-like context for art and design intervention and, perhaps, civic engagement. The experience allowed the CMP to develop engagement and design approaches that may have implications for the education of designers looking for a sense of social purpose. The following case illustrates how we set out to develop a visual and conceptual inventory of our intangible community assets.

## Photo-stocktaking at Lee Tung Street<sup>1</sup>

Since the late 1990s, Lee Tung Street – also nicknamed Wedding Card Street or Printing Street – and its surrounding areas had become a “civic war zone” between the street’s inhabitants and the Urban Renewal Authority, as the district was subjected to large-scale removal and redevelopment. Despite strong opposition, this historic and unique business cluster and its inhabitants’ livelihoods were to be destroyed. To scavenge what was due to be razed, the CMP began to collect images and stories from the street. Two CMP photographers were assigned to make detailed visual or photographic inventories of the street artifacts (e.g. letter-boxes, gates, street signs, etc.) and shop-fronts using a unique stocktaking approach. Student researchers were introduced to the business owners and the residents to collect anecdotes and images from its varied business and residential settings.

Rather than making a photo-documentary in a journalistic sense, the CMP proposed to use the rather more impartial approach of photo-recording each item of concern, be it an object, a person or a setting. Stylization and aesthetic input was deliberately avoided so that one item at a time could be faithfully recorded and represented in each photograph. Instead of catering to the aesthetic intention or extraordinary camera angle of the photographer, the emphasis was *just* to take a picture of the subject matter – say, each shop-front— under a consistent frame with the same shooting angle, distance and timing. The result was a collection of consistently framed images or “visual artifacts” representing the Lee Tung Street streetscape, which allowed for further organization, categorization, visual comparison and information design at later stages. **Figure 1** is a pair of composite streetscape compiled from the 400 collected images, which is impossible to see from any angle in reality (for a fuller explanation, see Siu, 2008). The shop-front images could also be rearranged to present a statistical survey of the shops’ trades, as in **Figure 2**, or to demonstrate the changes in the streetscape

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<sup>1</sup> For a further explanation of the project, see [http://www.hkcmp.org/cmp/c\\_002\\_street\\_lee.html](http://www.hkcmp.org/cmp/c_002_street_lee.html); and Siu, K.C. (2008).

across time, as in **Figure 3**. These visual re-presentations of Lee Tung Street became the starting point for our community engagement endeavors.



**Figure 1: The east (above) and west façade of the building clusters on Lee Tung Street.**



**Figure 2: A visual statistics revealing the types and number of shops in Lee Tung Street.**



**Figure 3: Lee Tung Street's streetscape documented in five stages, from 2005 (top) to 2009.**

## Visualizing the Community

As the CMP scavenged the “visuals” of the street, the researchers also engaged with the shop owners and residents, listening to their stories and discovering the network of social relations within the neighborhood. Through this dialogue, the hidden contexts and practices of the neighborhood's community life became clearer to the CMP researchers and helped us to visualize the culture of the street. For example, information collected from interviews with the shop owners was converted into a flow diagram (Figure 4) that illustrated how businesses had been relocated for various reasons over a period of 40 years, thereby revealing the cohesion of this community. These businesses, evidently, preferred to stay within the cluster and rarely wanted to move away from the street.

The visual information and images that we collected constitute a spectrum of irreplaceable visual knowledge of the site that conveys the shape or ecology of the community. The images provide specific visual information and comparative references, not just for an outside audience, but also for the inhabitants themselves to recollect their past histories and community anecdotes. For instance, the different generations of shop-front design helped to recall the evolving business model of the street's wedding-card-cum-printing-shops, from in-house backyard production to the contemporary aesthetics of wedding services with their emphasis on window displays (Figure 5). The cases of the



(Figure 6).



**Figure 4: Relocation of shops in Lee Tung Street across a period of 40 years.**



**Figure 5: Didactic panel in the exhibition illustrating the evolution of the Lee Tung Street's print shops.**



**Figure 6: Didactic panel in the exhibition explicating the mutually supportive relations among various shop-owners.**

<sup>2</sup> For detailed images and explanation, see the exhibition brochure: Community Museum Project (2005) *Street as Museum: Lee Tung Street*. HK: Community Museum Project.

## Exhibition as Community Platform

However, such visual artifacts or displays alone cannot suffice to reveal the form of a community. It is also necessary to create discourses around the artifacts or to make the related stories more apparent in accessible forms such as an exhibition, a press interview or a public discussion. The panoramic images and the related stories of Lee Tung Street were subsequently displayed (Figure 7), accompanied by an exhibition brochure (CMP, 2005), at a mall in the C.C. Wu Building in Wan Chai, just a few blocks away from the actual site. During the exhibition, the two façade images and the visual didactic panels drew a lot of public attention. The exhibits, together with the visual panels on display, not only helped to convey the multiple facets of the street's lives, they also helped to develop a shared sense of identity among the general public and members of the community, as the former had a chance to listen to the anecdotes told by the resident-docents. The exhibition evolved into a platform for the inhabitants and the audience to discuss their livelihood stories with regard to the ecology of the existing street in particular, and the local redevelopment issues in general. Many people incidentally visited the exhibition and heard the guided talks, and then became interested in visiting Lee Tung Street nearby, trying to re-discover its many attractive features and delights in context. The panoramic images in the exhibition and its publication unexpectedly turned into a visual guide for citizens to tour the street area; the images had become a “visual index” for the actual site. Since its demolition, this pair of panoramic images is the only remaining visual reference of the entire street.



**Figure 7: Residents became docents of the Lee Tung Street Exhibition at the mall of C.C. Wu Building.**



The exhibition drew huge media attention, and the images were used by almost all of the local media not only to promote the exhibition, but to launch local redevelopment debates. Suddenly, the images became a media icon bespeaking the issues and dilemmas around local urban gentrification and community conservation. The habitants and activists deployed the images as a “brand image” for their “save the street petitions,” using them as a backdrop for residents’ meetings, press conferences and many other cultural and lobbying events. The Lee Tung Street panorama unexpectedly became a visual medium, or a community artifact, for social dialogues and actions, as pointed out by Lave and Wenger (1991, p. 102):

*Knowledge within a community of practice and ways of perceiving and manipulating objects characteristic of community practices are encoded in artifacts...the activity system and the social world of which the artifact is part are reflected in multiple ways in its design and use and can become further “fields of transparency,” just as they can remain opaque.*

The exhibition and the panorama became a pretext for gathering people together, not just for the sake of the exhibition, but as an effective channel to re-present the street’s unspoken and many-folded community assets (Green & Haines, 2008, p. 11). These all helped to counter the unfavorable portrayal of the “old” communities by our mainstream society. Enabling citizens and students to conduct such in-depth exchanges with their neighbors, and to design such exhibitions and public events, could represent an ideal form of civic education. Given a visually engaging community approach, our educational resources come not only from schools or official textbooks, but also from the vernacular communities in the streets.

## **Mapping Social Capital**

It should be further pointed out that the idea of cultural scavenging is not limited to the collection of objects and documentation of images, but also includes the recollection of bonds among neighbors and the re-development of new community potential. During the research process, the neighborhood shops gradually came to identify themselves as the content providers behind the exhibition. On top of assisting with the curatorial concept, they also shaped our team’s understanding of the street’s ecology and its redevelopment issues at various personal, community and social levels. A community of collaboration, mutual learning and support was shaped between the neighborhood and the project team. This is a curatorial means of uncovering the type of social capital that can only be attained through genuine dialogue and networking among a neighborhood.

For instance, Mr. and Ms. Wong of the Tak Kee Print Shop volunteered to put on a demonstration of typecast printing with their old machine at the exhibition venue. Residents used the panoramic

images to explain to the visitors their livelihood stories and the issues and background to the re-development debate. They were the subjects of the exhibition and at the same time the lobbyists of the “save-the-street movement.” Unintentionally, a photo-stocktaking project had been transformed into a platform for collaboration. This opportunity also created new social relations, community practices and visions across different people and disciplines. It even brought about new business opportunities: as a token of appreciation to Tak Kee Printing Shop, the management of the C.C. Wu Building commissioned a print order of over a hundred thousand corporate red packets<sup>3</sup>. Although this was a minor business exchange, it is a reminder that modern corporate business does not necessarily need to be in conflict with grassroots economic activities. This is an example of the “bridging social capital” of a community (Putnam, quoted in Block, 2008, p. 17), which should embody the networks, trust and mutual supportive mechanisms within that community.

## Collecting and Presenting Visual Stories

In 2006, following the experience of Lee Tung Street, students went to districts K20-23<sup>4</sup> in Shamshuipo to conduct visual surveys and produce a visual-inventory of items of community interest. Their task was to identify and give visibility to the “community assets” often overlooked by the populace, and ironically, somehow by the community members themselves.

The students came into contact with the unique rooftop community, some long-term residents, and a century-old sauce shop (Figure 8). They talked to the people involved, made photo-inventories of the “material culture” around these households or trades, and uncovered their lifestyles and business practices. Employing the methodologies of photo-stocktaking, drawing and information design, the students compiled the visual materials and contents into a series of brochures that revealed the stories, knowledge and practical wisdom around these almost-forgotten neighborhoods. Following the idea of a “City as a Museum,” these pamphlets could be seen both as a record of the indigenous knowledge that illustrates its vernacular cultures, and as a kind of “community artifact” to be passed around to facilitate community interaction and sharing. For example, one of the brochures attempted to explicate all of the business details of the century-old Lau Shing Wo Sauce Shop, stocktaking every kind of sauce, the sauce-making methods, tools, suggested recipes, packaging, retail practices and so

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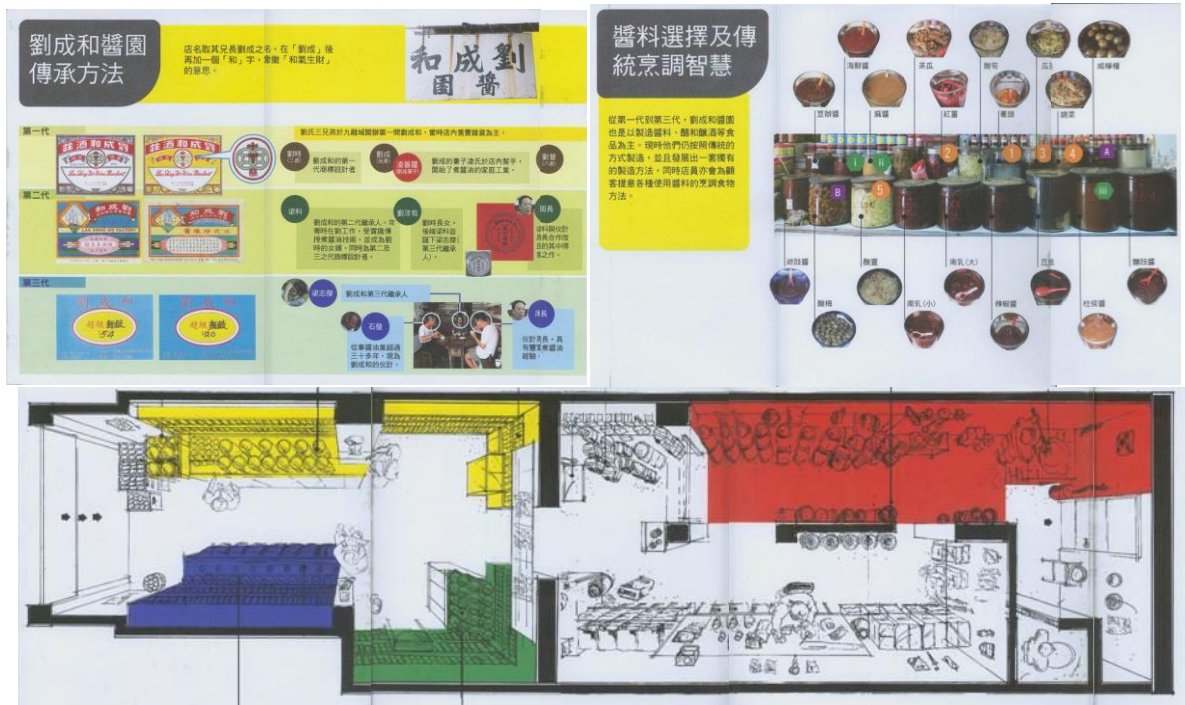
<sup>3</sup> Auspicious envelope used for giving money during Chinese New Year.

<sup>4</sup> The Hong Kong Urban Renewal Authority codes covering the area around Hing Wah Street, Fuk Wing Street, Cheung Wah Street, Un Chau Street and Castle Peak Road in Shamshuipo district, which the Hong Kong Housing Society had been demolishing in stages since 2004.



**Figure 8: The century-old Lau Shing Wo sauce shop and its owner.**

on (Figure 9). Attention was also paid to the shop's merchandising style, display design, shop facilities and spatial design, which had slowly evolved into a place for customers or residents of the neighborhood to socialize. These pamphlets helped to reveal aspects of the residents' livelihood practices that they themselves had been unable to articulate previously. Their intangible assets, made visual and tangible by the dissemination items, unexpectedly served to recollect the pride of the demoralized members of this threatened community. It was not only the residents who saw the brochures as potential reference guides for visitors to tour around the district; the mass media were also drawn to uncover the forgotten issues behind this soon-to-be-demolished neighborhood, where the richness of community lives was still vibrantly on display. These were historic but still active businesses that constituted not only the values and cultural spectacle of the district, but also the social capital of the neighborhood.



**Figure 9: The brochure of the Lau Shing Wo sauce shop, designed by a team of HK PolyU students as an information design assignment.**

## Giving Visual Forms to Community Assets

One of our design graduates, Maggie Chau, whose family happened to reside in the district and had been running a garage there for 30 years, was also under threat amidst the urban renewal scheme. However, rather than seeing her family as victims of the regeneration process, she started to mobilize her neighbors to assert their self-worth and community strengths. She invited a group of design volunteers to help collect the livelihood stories of the 18 neighboring shops in the community, including the aforementioned sauce shop, a traditional Chinese tea shop, a shoemaker, a florist-cum-arborist, an under-the-stairs 24 hours newspaper stall, a flower plaque maker (a traditional advertising designer for festivity), etc., using similar visual approach. This time, rather than editing and designing brochures, they created a series of single-frame comic portraits of the shop owners, stocktaking and illustrating the different life skills and practical knowledge of their trades. The graphics were then made into life-size banners that were exhibited along the street (Figures 10 and 11). The intention was to identify and recollect the indigenous knowledge and, by extension, the self-esteem of the members of the neighborhood. This is similar to the “capacity inventory” approach suggested by



Kretzmann & McKnight (1993, pp. 19-25), but using graphics and comic-style speech bubbles as a medium to present the experiences and stories of the characters. Written on transparent parchment, the content of the speech bubbles could be flexibly replaced or extended during the exhibition. All of the shop owners were present to chat with the audience and, in response, the latter could also write their own speech bubbles and stick them onto the banners. Such an approach welcomes audience participation, and is more public-friendly in facilitating communication among the subjects and the audience.

Although the exhibition lasted for only one day, it attracted unprecedented attention from the media. The press, instead of their usual reporting on the three-step approach - compensation, removal and develop - to redevelopment, started to use vernacular cultures and community assets as an angle for their reportages. Reporters began to look for the “lost traditions” of the community and the residents were able to express their community vision in media interviews. The residents finally felt they were getting respect from society at large. Rather than agonizing over their loss, they started to reclaim their sense of social identity and self-esteem, and felt empowered to make positive proposals for change. With the help of activists and urban planners, they developed a counter-proposal and negotiated with the government, requesting a same-district relocation policy to maintain their existing community network and way of life. Many cultural commentators began to write in support of the community actions, and thus opened up a debate on the people-oriented perspective to Hong Kong’s urban renewal issues.



**Figure 10 and 11: Life-size banners were exhibited at Hing Wah Street for one day**

To a community built collectively by a mutually supportive group of residents, a one-sided redevelopment policy that focused only on compensation and removal could not do justice to the

needs and aspirations of its members. What the residents really wanted was to preserve their social relations, their livelihoods and their expertise; in short, the intangible community assets within the neighborhood. Their community vision was turned into a proposition: to preserve and refurbish at least one of the old buildings in the area and turn it into a “community house”, where shops and residents who did not want to move afar could be relocated, and other floors could serve as a children’s activity center, library, community garden, gathering place, etc. for the neighborhood.



**Figure 12: Residents and students used the “tape-art” technique to visualize their proposal.**

Community members not only submitted a comprehensive written proposal to the government, but learnt to deploy more creative public activities to express their requests, using the visual approach advocated by the CMP. They were introduced to an American public art practitioner, Michael Townsend, who used colored adhesive tape to produce drawings in public space. The residents deployed Townsend’s tape-art technique to visualize their requests, and started to conceive images of the “reunited neighborhood and shops” in the remaining building. Those retail businesses that would stay were tape-drawn onto the shop fronts according to the plan in the proposal (Figure 12). Students from the HKICC Lee Shau Kee School of Creativity were invited to execute the project together with the residents and the artist. Students not only had a chance to participate in this





As a way to handle their own redevelopment issues, the residents, backed by the design graduate Maggie and her classmates, used the visual medium to self-organize and re-discover themselves. They worked with supportive friends from the cultural sector, art and design practitioners, social activists, the press, politicians and so on, to communicate their indigenous knowledge and vision in an easy-to-understand, visual manner. The residents were able to turn their experiences and insights from the four years of negotiation with the authorities into a specific matter of public interest; that is, to help to reclaim a people-oriented perspective towards urban redevelopment through mobilizing and involving the relevant public.

Going beyond the traditional concept and practice of museum curation and showmanship, which primarily deal with organizing and interpreting artifacts in exhibitions, these residents were generating not only the artifacts, but also people's networks and relevant community resources in the city. The CMP defines this as "social curating" (Siu, 2008), whereby community resources and people themselves are organized and mobilized to effect social changes. All this may sound like wishful thinking, yet it demonstrates a journey of community empowerment in practice.

## **From Community to Communities of Practice**

Where is the "community" within these redevelopment districts? Whether we refer to the network of people in a neighborhood, or a connected group of individuals from different places and disciplines, or people with shared interests getting together to form affiliations, a community is a difficult concept to define. From the above discussion, it is clear that not all of the inhabitants in the neighborhood subscribed to the community. Nor did the community exclude other members, such as the outside activists, student researchers, design volunteers, urban planners, members of the CMP, media friends, and even the management of the shopping mall, who gave a helping hand in petitioning to rescue the physical place or neighborhood. There was evidently a network of people, CMP members and designers included, who saw themselves as belonging to the community. Perhaps it is people who share similar life experiences at a certain time, say for the duration of a particular project – be it a social movement, an educational project or an exhibition – learn and gain support from each other in their everyday practices and execution of the project tasks. From the perspective of Wenger, et al., 2002, it can be seen as a coalition of people who, despite their individuality and non-common background or profession, share certain values and aspirations under, in this case, the redevelopment "domain" (Ibid, p.27).

The entity of a community goes beyond a fixed concept. Seeing community in terms of an area, a group or an association seems to limit what the term could encompass. A community not only



presupposes actions and meanings amongst its members, but also, as Wenger (2006) observes, shares “a concern or a passion for something they do and learn to do better as they interact regularly.” It constitutes a situated opportunity for the improvisational development of new practices (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 97), in which cross-disciplinary collaborations and social learning occur via legitimate peripheral participation, as we have seen in this paper.

Employing Lave and Wenger’s perspective, it is useful perhaps to extend the concept of a community to “communities of practice,” in which groups of people engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavor:

*Like a tribe learning to survive, a band of artists seeking new forms of expression, a group of engineers working on a similar problem, a clique of pupils defining their identity in the school, a network of surgeons exploring novel techniques, a gathering of first-time managers helping each other cope (Wenger, 2006).*

Our cases described above illustrate similar, though more cross-disciplinary, communities of practice, in locally relevant forms.

Although the term community of practice was originally coined to refer to a “community that acts as a living curriculum for apprentices,” it provides a perspective for us to see modern communities not only as clusters of functional or social media networks, nor merely as geographical or ideological entities, but “a complex set of social relationships through which learning takes place.” They are members who value their collective competence, and engage in joint activities and discussions that share information and help each other in pursuit of certain interests (Ibid). Seen in this light, it is possible to find such communities everywhere, even where no formal apprenticeship system exists; nor do the people concerned identify themselves as such, as in the aforementioned cases. Through the residents’ and the CMP’s attempts to visualize the community, the various participants developed, perhaps in a somewhat impromptu manner, a shared repertoire of resources – experiences, stories, visual tools or ways of addressing recurring problems – in their shared practice. It is the practice of an informal community *in situ*, which is dynamic and involves learning on the part of everyone.

In fact, communities of practice are everywhere, with a “structure defined by engagement in practice and the informal learning that comes with it” (Ibid), but they are so familiar to us that they often escape our attention. Yet, when such a community is given a name and brought into focus, it offers a perspective that can help us to see and understand the “community” better. And here, the designers have served a critical role, not only as visual form-givers, but community coordinators as Wenger, et al. (2002, p.80) prescribe. The practice of cultural scavenging and the CMP’s visual approach to collecting the un-collectable is, in effect, a means of lending form to the community intangibles that

tend to escape our notice. This is why the idea and methods for visualizing the community warrant further discussion in our design education circle.

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***King-chung SIU is an art/design commentator, installation artist, independent curator and a founding member of the Community Museum Project. He teaches at the School of Design of The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. He has been exploring – with students, teachers, designers, artists and community partners – ways to initiate collaborative projects that endeavor to visualize and disseminate local knowledge and practices in public forms such as exhibitions, cultural tourism, publications, etc.***

