



Gentrification repaints Wong Chuk Hang

As ArtWalk returns to Hong Kong, this year's territory-wide gallery tour highlights Wong Chuk Hang, an evolving factory area on the south side of Hong Kong Island. But gentrification looms and the founder of Artwalk fears it will overrun the laidback atmosphere people have come to love. Doug Meigs reports.

John Batten, standing on the rooftop of the old Remex Center, surveys with a jaundiced eye the post-industrial landscape of Wong Chuk Hang. He gazes out from the precipice at the concrete canyon below, clearly disappointed at what he sees of the rapid encroachment of gentrification.

"That's going to be a hotel, and that's going to be another hotel," he says, pointing to buildings shrouded in yellow mesh scaffolding. Many of the surrounding buildings are wholly owned by single corporate entities, or private individuals, making them prime sites for redevelopment. "That one will become offices," Batten says, pointing to a third building.

Batten's first lease in the neighborhood was at the Remex Center. The Hong Kong-based art critic and curator has kept a studio in Wong Chuk Hang for the past seven years, since high rents in Central forced him to close his gallery there.

He is also the founder of ArtWalk, a sort of annual open house for galleries all across Hong Kong now in its 13th year. ArtWalk 2013 will be next Thursday (April 18). A minibus will run from galleries located in Central to 10 art venues in Wong Chuk Hang. That's still only a small fraction of the roughly 70 galleries taking part this year, but it's the largest tally ever for Wong Chuk Hang.

"This valley has the most fantastic sea breeze. This is why I moved here," Batten says, pausing a moment before the rat-a-tat-tat of jackhammers shatters the moment. A switch of construction works spread below the rooftop vantage point. Cranes hoist steel beams and work crews swarm like ants. "That used to be the old Wong Chuk Hang housing estate. Now they want to turn it into a luxury housing estate," he says, with evident disgust.

Artists have become standard bearers of gentrification in Hong Kong. But when rents become too expensive in the neighborhoods, local creative types are forced to find cheaper real estate elsewhere. With space limited in Hong Kong, Batten worries that the super-heated property market could force both local small businesses and creative professionals in former factories to leave the territory all together. An exodus of Hong Kong artists for Shenzhen or farther-flung mainland locales would undermine the Hong Kong government's commitment to fostering "creative industries."

Surrounding Wong Chuk Hang are factory blocks housing mechanics shops, printers' studios, catering businesses, commercial designers and a growing number of places whose tenants are engaged in the arts. They use rezoned spaces vacated when local manufacturing industries moved to the mainland in the 1990s. The neighborhood is also home to Tai Wong Yee temple, a cluster of schools and a home for retired Catholic nuns.

The grating, clanging and shrieking sounds of "progress" are everywhere, drowning out the roar of car motors funneling toward the Aberdeen Tunnel, not very far away. Next door to the Remex Center, the MTR Corporation is building the southern terminus to the South Island Line's western section, still under construction — and above that there will be some 3,000 flats and 1,000 parking spaces for cars. Batten says the MTR announcement was the catalyst for neighborhood rental increases.

"I moved here seven years ago now. At the time, I said that Wong Chuk Hang is the ideal spot if you wanted less rent and more space. I told anyone who would listen," he says. "But the trend of artists moving in has been very slow, surprisingly. Anyone moving in now has missed the boat."

The availability of nearby art spaces is small compared to some of Hong Kong's other dilapidated factory districts. Kwun Tong, for example, is famous for its musicians stu-

A view of the new MTR terminal under construction in Wong Chuk Hang, which sprawls below the Remex Center. The development is located at the site of a former public housing estate. Developers are building luxury residential towers above the hub connecting southern Hong Kong Island into Hong Kong's railways.



dios (the government hopes to absorb Kwun Tong into a new central business district labeled "CBD2"). Fotan's factory blocks in New Territories have become synonymous with the hundreds of artists who open their studios once a year during the Fotanian Open House.

Batten believes art studios are right at home among blue-collar businesses. "Artists' studios are industrial," he claims, arguing that all of Hong Kong's factory districts are filled with small businesses that have important roles in the city's business supply chain.

"My building in Wong Chuk Hang is full of people doing completely legitimate businesses: logistics businesses, engineering, food production, catering, storage, and I have an office here. That's what I see when I walk around Wong Chuk Hang and Fotan and Kwun Tong," he says. "I think it has been a bad policy for the government to come in with a very thick brush and say that industrial buildings should be used for 'more productive' uses."

Batten has surfed the tide of gentrification all around the island. He moved to Hong Kong more than 20 years ago from Australia. He opened his first art gallery in Sheung Wan before moving to Central in 1997 amid the Asian Financial Crisis. The booming international arts scene on Hollywood Road flourished. More and more hip cafes, bars and boutiques opened. Rents skyrocketed. Since he moved to Wong Chuk Hang, he relocated once again, moving two buildings down the road.

Wong Chuk Hang is still cheaper per square foot than other former industrial districts that have become popular with artists despite the rising rents, Batten says. The downside is that floor areas are much larger — usually between 5,000 and 10,000 square feet — which makes the rents prohibitively high for young local artists.

Joining the bandwagon

Wong Chuk Hang still feels far from gentrified. Its backstreets are pretty grimy, although a handful of upscale private kitchens are opening. Spring Workshop, a non-profit arts space on the third floor of the Remex Building, has catalogued the local restaurants and attractions on the "About" section of its website.

Mimi Brown launched the workshop roughly a year ago as part of a five-year trial. She organizes artists' talks and workshops for local and foreign artists visiting Hong



Kong.

"I had been to Fotan and Kwun Tong a lot, and I had been considering those places," says Brown. "But then when I found Wong Chuk Hang, it was like finding my long lost dream, because it's also on Hong Kong Island where I live and it's so convenient."

Moving in wasn't easy. She had to renovate the former book warehouse completely. She installed chic white walls and flooring. There's a bar, cozy sofas, themed studios for artists-in-residence, not to mention lots of artwork.

Brown has embraced the Wong Chuk Hang neighborhood as her own. Spring's Cantonese-speaking interns have tried, without success, to get the construction workers outside to come up for tea or coffee during their breaks.

During ArtWalk, an installation on Spring's balcony pays homage to the neighborhood's origins. Wong Chuk Hang literally means "yellow bamboo trench" in Cantonese. The installation creates an open-air yellow bamboo grove for visitors to explore. It's made of golden-tinted aluminum rods and titled "The Industrial Forest." Motion sensors under a carpet of AstroTurf cause the metallic canes to sway in the wind.

The design team responsible for the heritage-minded installation, Esqui, has an office in the Wong Chuk Hang area too. An artist's statement from Esqui's founding architects (Eric Schuldenfrei and Marisa Yiu) explains the artificial bamboo grove "invites interpretation and recurrent transformation."

"With Wong Chuk Hang, you see the past, the present and the future all at once," Brown muses. "Two years ago when I discovered this neighborhood, it was even sleepier and the MTR station was just a news item. Now you can see the dynamic changing. For another project, we have a photographer actually documenting the changes in the neighborhood."

Even the government is joining the Wong Chuk Hang trend. Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying announced that the Hong Kong Arts Development Council (HKADC) would turn a Wong Chuk Hang industrial building into a subsidized arts space, offering "concessionary rental rates" to young artists.

Plans are still in the works. A spokeswoman for the Arts Development Council declined to name the specific building or elaborate any further details.



Problems with managed art spaces

Publicly managed art spaces, such as the Cattle Depot Artist Village and the Jockey Club Creative Arts Center, came under criticism in the past for setting out strict requirements including specific hours that studios must be open to the public.

Choosing Wong Chuk Hang for the new HKADC-subsidized art space raised some eyebrows. After all, most of Hong Kong's young artists live in Kowloon or New Territories where rents are more affordable. And the industrial space of Fotan and Kwun Tong — already popular among artists — would make more sense logistically.

"Why choose Wong Chuk Hang?" asked Lui Chun-kwong, a retired Chinese University of Hong Kong art professor who helped to establish Fotan as a destination for artists. "Fotan is quite special because it's managed only by artists, and only open for a few days a year, posing little disturbance to the artists at work," he said, speaking on the final day of Fotanian's most recent once-a-year open house in mid-January.

Back in 2001, some students informed him that they had found an affordable studio space in a Fotan factory block. That year, he bought his current studio and hosted a solo show for a promising student (Lee Kit). Another studio also opened that day. Word spread. Every year more artists have moved to Fotan. The most recent Fotanian event spanning three weekends featured more than 250 artists in roughly 90 studios.

Chow Chun-fai, an artist involved in organizing the latest event offered praise for the HKADC plans. "This is the first time the government has had such a long policy address mention to culture," he said from his studio in a nearby factory block.

The amount of space available might be limited to only 10,000 square feet, which could only accommodate five or six artists, he said. But size is not his main concern. He wants to see a framework established for cultural organizations to acquire industrial space and bypass building regulation hurdles that have plagued arts spaces such as Hidden Agenda in Kwun Tong.

"If there is a road map in Wong Chuk Hang, that means the government recognizes the need," he said. "So it's good for all other industrial users — especially the artists."



Hong Kong ArtWalk 2013

What: Participating galleries will open their doors for a night of art, drinks and *œuvres*.

Ticket sales benefit the Society for Community Organization (SCO).

When: Thursday, April 18 (4:30 pm to 11:30 pm).

Where: 70 galleries throughout Hong Kong. Most are located around Soho in Central District; 10 are located in the Wong Chuk Hang area. A minibus will run from Central to Wong Chuk Hang and Aberdeen every half hour.

Cost: HK\$450 (adults) and \$150 (tertiary students).



The entrance to a functioning industrial space in Fotan is next door to a fancy art studio.



Lui Chun-kwong was one of the first artists in Fotan.



Mimi Brown is the founder of Spring Workshop in Wong Chuk Hang.



Chow Chun-fai is the chairman of Fotan Artist Village.



John Batten was an early arts professional to arrive in Wong Chuk Hang.