SOHO Ornamentation

In 1990's, an area in Hong Kong Central took advantages from the mix culture in central like immigrants from different countries, low rent especially during 1998 economic crisis, the historical buildings, the development of Lan Kwai Fong etc. it grow into a cultural cluster organically. This area was named SOHO with the acronym of 'South of Hollywood Road' by the foreigner living there, and so inevitably has association with SOHO in London and New York. Hong Kong SOHO is a well-known place both locally and internationally. It appears mainly in two kinds of media: tourist books, cultural and art articles.

This article will mainly focus on how art activities were consumed or portrayed in this district by different media. In a culture cluster, art activities are something cannot be missed. And it should not be accounted by the number of galleries and studio, but also the diversity of art form and it's openness to new art media. Famous art and culture clusters like Wicker Park in Chicago, Chelsea in New York, Friedrichshhain in Berlin or pioneers like SOHO in New York and London. They are/were or at least used to be the center of contemporary and avant-garde art activities, especially for local artists.
Firstly, let’s look at how art was portrayed, and then we will have a look at how
SOHO was portrayed by media later.

Art as ornament in SOHO life style

According to an analysis of Leung Chin-Fung Jeff(2009), there are 47 galleries
located in Central, which is around 69.1% of Hong Kong galleries.¹ Most of them are
in SOHO area. However, the art aspect is always in an assistant role for enriching the
SOHO life style.

The first sentence of Wikipedia description for New York SOHO² is
“SOHO...originally associated with the arts...”

The description for Hong Kong SOHO ³ is:
‘The SOHO district in Hong Kong is an entertainment district.’

From the comparison of these two statements, we can see that Hong Kong SOHO is
portrayed less art oriented.

Michael Ingham and Mike Ingham stated that “the so-called SOHO area of central,
consisting of bars and restaurants in streets radiating from the escalator spine of

¹ Source from Art Walk 2009 analysis by Leung Chin-Fung Jeff
² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SoHo
Shelley Street. SOHO provides a wide range of international cuisine... the area is also home to many of Hong Kong’s art galleries.”

Also, Richard Sterling, Elizabeth Chong and Lushan Charles Qin stated “SOHO is a bubbly conversation with dinner included. The little restaurants, and most of them are little, that cling to the hill alongside the escalator were not purpose built. Many are converted houses and are often little works of art. …”

From the above articles, we can feel that art is in a position of side product, to enlighten life in SOHO, to decorate SOHO with an artistic style instead of a place for artistic development. Furthermore, the official website introduces SOHO as a restaurant and entertainment area under the category of “where to eat”. In additional, in another well-known website “ilovesoho.hk” its homepages navigation bar was divided into four sections: “eat in SOHO, drink in SOHO, shop in SOHO, and live in SOHO”. Obviously, art is not the main focus in promotion of SOHO officially.

Although Lorette E.Roberts suggested in his sketches book that SOHO is much more

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4 Michael Ingham, Mike Ingham, 2007, Hong Kong: a cultural History, Oxford University Press US
5 Richard Sterling, Elizabeth Chong, Lushan Charles Qin, 2001, World Food Hong Kong, Lonely Planet Publication Pty Ltd, Australia
6 http://www.discoverhongkong.com/eng/dining/location-lankwaifong-soho.html
than its tourist attractions, we seldom see art scene in his book. The only pages titled “artists on street” only portray kids who are drawing on roadside.\textsuperscript{7} Galleries, performance spaces and artist studios are absent. Even in the book made by an artist and emphasized on diversity of activities in SOHO, placed art as an ornaments.

Hark Yeung\textsuperscript{(2008)} claims that many great cities also want to develop district, a tourist spot with rich cultural elements and artistic disposition.\textsuperscript{8} Also in many newspaper articles, for example two clips from \textit{wenweipo} \textsuperscript{(2008)}, they tried to compare the Hong Kong SOHO with other new SOHOs in Asia like Singapore, Beijing, shanghai where attempts to develop its SOHO following the model of New York and London.\textsuperscript{9} Under this context, Hong Kong SOHO has strangely become part of this artificial SOHO construction trend for attracting tourists, though the development of it is rather organic.

\textbf{Foreign culture oriented in SOHO}

Although SOHO was claimed to be the representative of Hong Kong’s peculiar hybrid cultures, that always appearing in movies representing Hong Kong’s uniqueness. For

\textsuperscript{7} Lorette E. Roberts, 2005, Sketches of SoHo, Blacksmith Books
\textsuperscript{8} 黑楊,2008, 香港也 SOHO, 商務印書局
\textsuperscript{9} http://paper.wenweipo.com/2009/03/05/SY0903050001.htm
http://paper.wenweipo.com/2009/03/05/OT0903050005.htm
example, the movie "ChungKing Express"  \(^{10}\) and many other movies of Wong Kar
Wai, were shot in SOHO especially the escalator area; the movie Chinese box\(^{11}\)
claimed that the protagonists are intended to symbolize China’s, Hong Kong’s and
Britain perspectives. Also, same as ChungKing Express, their main movement area is
Central especially the escalator area inside SOHO. Even in the Hollywood movie
Batman chose to shoot the only scene in Hong Kong in SOHO. They apparently think
SOHO is a symbol to recognizing Hong Kong. However, this symbol of Hong Kong
is mainly characterized by foreigners. At least, in SOHO you can not order food if you
don’t speak English, the best bar are where the foreigner hang out.

Undoubtedly, the formation of SOHO is an example revealing the power and
influences of foreign cultures in Hong Kong, practically and literally. The name of
SOHO was first mentioned in a 1996 article in the South China Morning Post
newspaper attributed to Elgin Street restaurant owner, Thomas Goetz. SOHO is come
from foreign culture and was named by foreigner. The district was nourished by the
great cultural diversities inside. For example the Nepal cuisine; French book store,
Chinese porcelain stores etc. A famous tourist guide book describes SOHO as an old
and shabby district originally, and then since moved in the foreign traders and

\(^{10}\) ChungKing Express directed by Wong Kar Wai 1996 (USA)
\(^{11}\) Chinese box by Wayne Wang 1998 (Hong Kong)
professionals, magically it developed into a new stylish living environment.\textsuperscript{12}

One Saturday afternoon, I went to Osage which is one of the largest galleries in SOHO. I stayed for one hour, and only saw 5 people came in. In the same day, I visited another gallery and talked to the owner. She said that normally there are not many people but the buyers, which most are foreigners, will deal with them personally.

Also, one thing notable is that both galleries managers are English speaking Chinese.

Though 49.1\% of Hong Kong galleries are located in central, only 7.9\% artist presented are from Hong Kong. The mainland artists have the greatest proportion in the promoting artist lists. This contributes to the phenomenon that foreign buyer have feeling that Hong Kong artist is part of mainland art scene or mainland artists are presented as Hong Kong art work.

\textbf{Over emphasized Nostalgia}

Not only the lack of local artist presentation, there are also absent of local people presentation too. They are usually someone to be described, to be cherished and to be signified, but not expressing. Most materials about SOHO are written by foreigners, or Chinese who have Western background. The old shops and market, represented
local life; the old men and old ladies worked in tradition shops and market are representative of local people. We can notice that from the sketches of Lorette E. Roberts who drew an old man carrying a traditional style basket for his book cover.

Since those elderly are old or had low education level, they are inevitably to be passive and alienated in this history making process. The normal lives of Hong Kong people, like the one living in public estate, were not included in this Hong Kong’s representative area. The presentation of SOHO is more likely a middle class moody nostalgia.

In short, from most of the articles mentioned above, comparing to art, escalator is more significant in representing SOHO. Almost all books and articles mentioned the escalator in a way that its construction is one of the most important reasons for the development of SOHO. Quoted from Richard Sterling, Elizabeth Chong, Lushan Charles Qin(2001) : "...in 1992 the city constructed the longest outdoor escalator in the world...the escalator like any great trade route, has attracted crow of merchants, and some of Hong Kong’s best restaurant have appeared alone side it.". Obviously, the escalator is very calculated and directed, as opposed to the commonly accepted "organic development" of SOHO. All the portrays and images of SOHO, of art, of Hong Kong are full of ambiguity, and imagination.