



Freespace Happening, organised by the West Kowloon Cultural District, Hong Kong.

The Art of Creating Space:

A case study about Freespace Happening, on creating and establishing relationships in physical and mental space.

Michelle Rocha

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Type: Provocation Paper for the Clore Leadership Fellowship 2017-18

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Published Under: Creative Commons
(Clore Fellowship funded by Arts Council England)



This paper was written as a part of the author's Fellowship with Clore Leadership in 2017-18.

About the author

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Michelle Rocha is Producer, Performing Arts (Music and Outdoor) of the West Kowloon Cultural District Authority. She is responsible for producing both audience and artistic development projects.

As the Producer of Freespace Happening, West Kowloon's regular outdoor event that has reached over 170,000 audiences, she curated performances, invited partners and initiated cross-genre collaborations. Other projects under her belt include Freespace Fest (2012-2014, which has reached around 100,000 people over 3 years), Compartmentalized (contemporary x hip hop dance piece that toured to Australia), various New Works Forums for dance and theatre, initiated Hong Kong indie bands' debut performances at the Iceland Airwaves Music Festival and produced Freespace Mixtape Vol.1 and 2, where her team matched musicians from different genres to collaborate on live and recorded performances.

Before joining West Kowloon, Michelle was part of the Cultural Olympiad and Torch Relay programming team for the Olympics and Paralympics in 2012 at the Wales Millennium Centre. She has also worked as the Company and Programme Officer of the Hong Kong Dance Company, a theatre educator at Theatre Noir, a freelance producer for the international rock concert promoter Lushington/Live Nation and for the Hong Kong Museum of Art, and Fundraising Manager for the Hong Kong International Jazz Festival.

This paper reviews how the West Kowloon Cultural District creates physical space and opens up mental space for artists and audiences alike through Freespace Happening.

Whilst writing this paper, I am on the train from Manchester to the Lake District. Staring out into hectares of green fields and forests (I know no one else on the train will call a few dozen trees a forest, but it does feel that way to me), I cannot help but query: what do you do with all this space? Born and bred a Hong Kong person, I have shared this 2,754 km² land with 7.35 million others (as a comparison, Greater Manchester is 1,276 km² big and has around 2.78 million people living in it). We are used to being squeezed, squished and stacked, we rarely visit friends' houses because we cannot fit more than 4 people in the shoeboxes that we live in on the 48th floor of a building. Did you know that we do not even have space for you to die in Hong Kong? 90% of our deceased are cremated, but there is an average waiting time of four years before you can get an urn space. According to the Hong Kong columbarium industry, we will have a shortage of 400,000 niches within the next five years. In five years' time, the West Kowloon Cultural District, which is a 40-hectare cultural district on prime waterfront land (reclaimed, of course), should have opened at least another handful of theatres, museums and a 23-hectare park. In a place where you cannot even afford the space to die and being a contortionist seems to be the only way to go, what role do art and culture play? Maybe we can follow suit and offer an Eternity Membership as the Museum of Old and New Art in Hobart does – where you get invitations to parties, receive annoying leaflets and, when you die, get cremated and put in a fancy urn in the museum. But what can we offer to artists and audiences whilst they are alive?

Ever since returning to Hong Kong in 2012, I have been working on the West Kowloon Cultural District's annual outdoor arts festival, Freespace Fest. We activated the better part of the construction site and turned concrete grounds and untamed lawns into stages for music, dance and theatre, and platforms for artists, audiences and partners to co-create programmes meaningful to them. We have hosted more than 100,000 audience members over three years with a two-day free event each year. Staff, artists, partners, audiences (and their pets) all loved it, but alas, the land needs to be built on – so we need to downsize and move. We reduced the footprint of the event space to about a quarter of what we used to work on, but increased the event to 10 days over seven months per year. Between 2015 and 2018, we reached more than 170,000 audience members. In mid-2017, we learnt to anticipate another move, because more buildings were to be constructed. To be fair, it is a good thing because a variety in the provision of space gives more flexibility to the type of art and activities that can happen – after all, we avoid programming outdoors during the summer months due to the unbearable heat and destructive typhoons; having a roof over our head means we can programme regardless of weather conditions. Another good thing is that this move should be the final major move for us. For the first time in Freespace Fest and Freespace Happening's evolution, we can move into a permanent home – the Art Park. Unlike the rest of Hong Kong, we will no longer be in a 'borrowed place on borrowed time'. For years, we have been using temporary spaces during the construction period to tell stories that moved us. Settling into the Art Park signifies the first step in the many to come in West Kowloon's development

– we are steadily moving into permanent homes. Inspired by our new space and my recent travels to the vast land that is the United Kingdom through Clore, I set off to ask myself and the team, what is our relationship with “space”? Hong Kong has always struggled with the idea of space – from land supply and priorities for land use, to space for freedom of choice and organic growth, to space for collective experience and for personal reflections. What kind of space do we want to occupy at this moment in time? What kind of space do we want to pass on to our future selves and those to come? Through how Freespace Happening is programmed and what programmes we offer to the audiences, I hope to widen our perspectives of space, both mental and physical, and evaluate what space we are inhabiting and creating, and what sort of relationships and impact we have with these spaces.

Creation of Space through Arts and Culture – Harnessing the Power of Open Invitations and Programming Strategies

How arts and cultural organisations can create space for dialogue

Freespace Happening is programmed by a collective made up of the Music and Outdoor Team of the West Kowloon Cultural District, an Artistic Associate, external Programme Partners and Young Music Programmers. After trialling a few different models for how artistic decisions were made, we have adopted a model that encourages dialogue and diversity of standpoints. Instead of having the Producer (me) make all the programming choices, we start by coming up with a theme that all programmers work towards. The theme is often broad, vague and open to interpretation, such as “why do we tell stories?”, “the spirit of Freespace” or, this year, “space”. We then invite Programme Partners and Music Programmers to put together a programme plan according to the given theme and their individual expertise. This will be followed by discussions and meetings led by the Music and Outdoor team to explore how the programmes can work together to present a coherent story to the audiences. In recent years, we started encouraging Programme Partners to invite other partners they have an interest in working with to join in the conversation, to ensure that we have diverse viewpoints in programming, and remain fresh and exciting to audiences. This year in particular, I deliberately stood back to create space for the rest of the team to speak up even more, and make suggestions on the partners and artists we should invite. We created physical space for dialogue and space that allows invitation into those dialogues with partners.

The catalytic role arts and cultural organisations play in the creation of space for possibilities

We started the Young Music Programmers initiative in 2014, where we invited musicians from all sorts of genres to programme the music stages of Freespace Fest and Freespace Happening. Hong Kong musicians focus a lot on improving their performance techniques and rarely have the chance to flex their artistic muscles in other ways. We want to use Freespace Fest and Freespace Happening as platforms to get artists to think about how else they can communicate and connect with audiences. I often find that these artists have fascinating ideas once you have opened up the space for them to create. These musicians have come back to us stating how this opportunity has inspired them, and a lot of them started organising

their own events to explore more ways of presenting their and other artists' works, and also to reach out to new audiences.

We also observed that, previously, there was not a lot of cross-genre/cross-art form dialogue between artists. Rock musicians did not know classical musicians, and jazz musicians rarely worked with electronic musicians. Through the regular live presentation platform that is Freespace Happening, we mixed musicians from different genres to give them paid opportunities to work with new artists, to stimulate thoughts on composition and arrangement. We chose six out of 13 groups we have put together for Freespace Happening 2016-2017 to enter a studio recording phase. Over the period of a year, at least half of the groups are still collaborating/ have toured/ have released new songs/ were signed by a label without further support from West Kowloon – all we did was to offer the space for new possibilities.

Exploration of space through programming – a discourse around Freespace Happening 2018/19

In a place where people do not even have space to die, a cultural district should create space for people to live. Art imitates life, and life draws inspiration from art – I hope that Freespace Happening can be a space where audiences can rethink their relationship with space, and that they can bring the positive impact and vibes they got from the event into their everyday life. I am curious about how a shift in perception around our relationship with space can lead to a cultural shift with impact – below are two points of departure that I am interested in exploring in the next year:

Exploration of sustainability through arts and culture: people as custodians of space

In a place as densely populated as Hong Kong, the impact of people on the environment is undeniable. We are trained to live a fast life – fast food, fast fashion, instant gratification and instant returns – as though we own all the resources that are currently available to us and there are no consequences in burning through all of them. In May 2017, the Hong Kong government tasked the Housing Society to construct on areas that were designated country park lands for residential use. Would we have the same attitude if we saw ourselves as custodians of space instead of the owners of space? How do we ensure sustainability? How can we learn more about beauty? How do we ensure that those who come after us can also share this relative freedom in the utilisation of space and resources as we do? I was at a few gigs and festivals whilst on my Clore Leadership Programme experience, and am appalled by the number of disposable plastic cups strewn all over the floor after a show. Freespace Happening has worked and will continue to work with partners such as Go Cup, a Hong Kong charity that offers free re-usable cups at festivals with a 5-pound refundable deposit – in the past year, we have rented out more than 2,000 plastic cups for Freespace Happening audiences. Unlike the United Kingdom, we do not have potable tap water in Hong Kong, so we are investigating the possibility of offering water fountains for audiences to refill their water bottles to further reduce the use of disposable water bottles. The United Kingdom has readily accessible nature reserves and parks. I run into people strolling through the grassland who are

super knowledgeable in identifying bird calls and other elements of nature. Knowledge and understanding improve appreciation and spur a sense of responsibility – I plan on working with the Hong Kong Bird Watching Society to offer eco-art activities and installations to educate our audiences on who we are sharing our space with and to remind us of our responsibility to the space we inhabit.

Accessibility and well-being in arts and culture – the respect for collective and personal space

When you share a home with seven million other people, do you ever look at who you are sharing the space with? Have we genuinely considered if we share the same stories, histories, contexts and memories? What can we learn from each other? And whilst we are busy looking around us, are we giving ourselves enough personal space for reflection? Whilst accessibility services and art by artists with accessible needs have been a basic offering in the UK for the past decades, Hong Kong is just catching up. Understandably, the accessibility of a construction site is quite restricted, for people of all abilities and needs. As we move into a permanent site, we have more confidence in providing enhanced access for audiences and artists of all abilities. Partners such as the Arts with the Disabled Association Hong Kong will bring not only accessibility services to Freespace Happening, but also education and outreach work to us to help local audiences understand the nuanced needs and sensitivities that exists, and to remind us of the people with whom we share our space. Apart from looking at the space around us, Freespace Happening encourages people to address the space within us. The House of Hong Kong Literature will offer writing and reading programmes that encourage audiences to set aside time in their busy schedule (or busy festival day!) to slow down, be introspective and write down their reflections on personal stories.

The space for more

The above is not an exhaustive list of issues we can address, and space is also left for other ideas to be explored and implemented – we are living in a compact enough world, I hope, that through the arts, we (artists, audiences, staff, partners) can all find space for more sensitivity, possibilities, constructive discussions and joy.

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