

Hong Kong Harbor.
(Photo by John Knowles.)



Modern urban housing looks the same in Hong Kong as it does in Los Angeles or London. Not only is there a generalized lack of response to ambient climate but also a specific indifference to the directions of sun and wind. All actions in response to natural variation are automatic, mechanical and generally hidden from view.

Perhaps the ultimate machine symbol is the modern office building. It not only works like a machine but also sometimes assumes a machine aesthetic. There are no external variations of

Hong Kong Housing.
(Photo by John Knowles.)



shape corresponding to sunlight or gravity that might cue us as to which way we are looking. There are no internal variations of light, of air or humidity to stimulate the senses and remind us that time is passing. It is an unvarying world of fluorescent tubes and uniformly conditioned air, of cubicles and computers. The most persistent ritual takes people up in the morning, down at night. Otherwise, one can theoretically stay at one's desk indefinitely, enveloped by a monotone behind sealed windows.

So far, this book has been about buildings, but buildings do not exist as separate things. They have a context, a setting with its own rhythms and corresponding rituals. Those settings have changed dramatically with growth. The next chapter traces a history of this change in the American heartland.



Hong Kong Office Building.
(Photo by John Knowles.)