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Hong Kong, Grounded

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Photographs of the contact zones between the mountain and the multilevel metropolis.

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Hong Kong is relentlessly vertical, a city of towers and skyways, elevators, and ladder streets, built on a mountainside — a city without ground, according to the architects Adam Frampton, Jonathan D. Solomon, and Clara Wong. In their guidebook to the three-dimensional circulatory networks of downtown Hong Kong, they draw a city that has radically abrogated its relationship with the ground plane. [1]

It's a beautiful, insightful book, but its sense of gravity is all wrong. For no matter how deeply you lose yourself in the aerial labyrinth, how many escalators you ascend from sea level, how many building portals you pass through, inevitably the mountainous terrain of Hong Kong Island rises up at a faster rate. The levitating pedestrian bumps into the hillside and is brought back to earth. In Hong Kong, the ground is everywhere.

The photographs in this slideshow examine contact zones between the multilevel metropolis and the mountain. Rocks and soils that in other cities would be buried or obscured here are integral to the setting. The terrain that weaves between streets, under buildings, and through public spaces reminds pedestrians of the tenuous relation between the city and its geology. To guard against landslides,

the most precipitous grades are stabilized by engineers and classified within a government database that contains 60,000 registered slopes.



This is a serious enterprise, with official plates identifying the geotechnical compliance of each slope. Engineering solutions vary

from simple block retaining walls to more elaborate structures with anchors, scaffoldings, high tensile wires, and ferro-cement. They constitute a topographic image of the island.

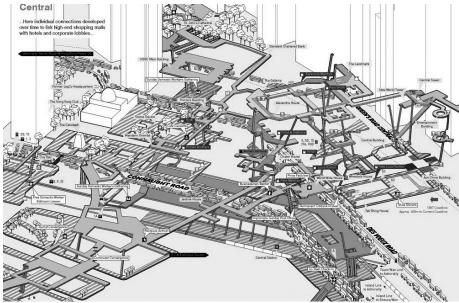
These slopes are also frequently put to civic use. Usable land is so scarce that community functions are shoehorned into the engineered hillsides: miniature pocket parks, vertical gardens, seating nooks, bus stops, even ultra-compact municipal storage depots. For flatlanders who are accustomed to cities built on floodplains, this is a novel arrangement of civic infrastructures. When analyzed in the traditional plan view, Hong Kong's pocket spaces do not fit conventional templates for good urban legibility, accessibility, repetition, structure, or form. Often, you cannot see from one element to the next, nestled above or below. And yet, the assemblage works. It meets the higher goals of urban design: distinctiveness, variation, and responsiveness to place.

With infrastructure now stretched in urbanist discourse to refer to benches, cell towers, and almost anything multiplied across the city, the term has lost some of its potency. We ought to consider the root of the word — infra meaning below — and look carefully at the structures of the city that are underfoot. Hong Kong's system of 60,000 registered slopes is a genuine landscape infrastructure that underlies the city and grounds the social and physical experiences we have there.

1. Adam Frampton, Jonathan D. Solomon, and Clara Wong, Cities Without Ground: A Hong Kong Guidebook (Novato, CA: Oro Editions, 2012).

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Axonometric diagram of elevated pedestrian circulation systems in Central Hong Kong, from Cities Without Ground: A Hong Kong Guidebook (2012),



Where the city meets the ground. Artificial topography of reinforced ferro-cement beside a pedestrian skyway. Registered slope 11SW-B / C65. [Karl Kullmann]



Blocks and scaffolding at the University of Hong Kong. Registered slope 11SW-A / C199. [Karl Kullmann]



Stabilized hillside at the Hong Kong Zoological and Botanical Gardens. Registered slope 11SW-B / FR202. [Karl Kullmann] Dot map of the 60,000 registered slopes in Hong Kong. [Hong Kong Geotechnical Engineering Office]





Map of registered slopes in Central Hong Kong. Dark gray indicates engineered slopes and red indicates retaining walls. [Hong Kong Slope System GIS database]



Seating ledge cantilevered over registered slope. [Karl Kullmann]



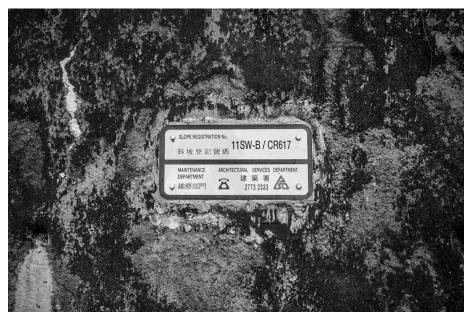
Public plaza used for temporary storage during maintenance on registered slope 11SW-B / C65. [Karl Kullmann]



Exposed utilities infrastructure. Registered slope 11SW-A / CR19. [Karl Kullmann]



Registered slope 11SW-A / C33. [Karl Kullmann]



Slope registration plaque: 11SW-B / CR617. [Karl Kullmann