



Photo Essay

Wild Cities: The Renegade Roots of Urban Taiwan

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The latter half of the twentieth century was a transformative period in the socioeconomic development of East Asia. Trailing the success of Japan, the "Four Asian Tigers"—Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan—pushed the region toward modernity with their strong economic growth fueled by industrialization and trade. A key consequence of this growth was rapid urbanization, which produced inevitable growing pains in the swiftly expanding cities. In the case of Taiwan, this organic expansion further collided with a concurrent influx of immigrants from mainland China and the marked passivity of a government whose gaze was fixed on that mainland. Combined with Taiwan's complex history under various competing influences in the region, these developments heralded an era marked by social tension that seeped into the physical form of the emerging cityscapes.

In the wake of the Chinese Civil War, which ended in Communist victory on the mainland in 1949, the island of Taiwan became the base of the exiled government of the Republic of China (ROC), which had lost the war. The intricacies of Cold War geopolitics enabled the ROC to stay in power in Taiwan, fending off the Communists and cultivating the dream of one day retaking the mainland. While the ROC government was preoccupied with this external focus, Taiwan's urban development kicked off in an unregulated manner that still characterizes Taiwanese cities today. The informal and unchecked expansion produced urban environments that now, decades later, seem visually and physically incongruous with Taiwan's socioeconomic maturity.

This visibly rough urbanity sometimes elicits blunt queries that spark discussion. A question on the website Quora—"Why are Taiwanese cities so shabby?"—has received no fewer than fifty-four answers. In a City-Data web forum, the question "Why does Taiwan look much poorer than it actually is?" boasts thirteen pages of replies. The adjectives in these questions are not the most flattering, but people familiar with urban Taiwan will know what they refer to: unruly city centers full of mid-rise apartment blocks heavily augmented with illegal extensions. Buildings are frequently topped with extra floors built with sheet metal and plywood, their balconies are enclosed and transformed into extra rooms, and their concrete facades are streaked with makeshift utility installations. So ubiquitous are these structures in today's Taiwan that even international news outlets such as the BBC have investigated their origins (Sui 2015).

To an outsider, such raw cityscapes in a highly developed society are a visual curiosity, but for the residents, they are often a hazardous necessity. Various safety issues routinely plague the buildings—particularly a tendency to catch fire. However, their popularity is perpetuated by a lack of public rental housing and rising prices in the private market. This problem has prompted repeated calls for the authorities to take a more decisive stance on housing and to eliminate hazards. There have been various demolition and redevelopment campaigns, but after decades of passive housing policies, solving the issue is not an easy task.

The following is a brief exploration of these informal residential spaces and their features, hazards, and origin. The focus is on the particularities of Taiwanese society that have contributed to the emergence of such cityscapes: geography, population, and the regulatory and enforcement activities undertaken—or, perhaps more accurately, *not* undertaken—by the government. What emerges from this examination is no less than a reflection of Taiwan’s overall societal character: a nebulous existence geared toward survival over splendor.

Crowded Exile

The story starts with space, and specifically the lack of it. The combined total area of Taiwan and its outlying islands is no more than 36,197 square kilometers (13,975.74 square miles). A population exceeding 23 million makes Taiwan one of the most densely populated places on earth. This density is further aggravated by formidable geographic limitations. Taiwan is a green but rugged island some 180 kilometers (nearly 112 miles) off China’s east coast and as such, it is inherently bound by the natural barrier of the ocean. As a contrast to the surrounding water, 63 percent of Taiwan’s land consists of hills and mountains. This proportion effectively leaves about 37 percent for the use of industry, agriculture, and major urban development (Chou and Chang 2008, 68). Consequently, most of Taiwan’s population is tightly packed in the urban centers along its west coast.

Taiwan has been home to indigenous Austronesian peoples for thousands of years, but the large-scale settling of its narrow coastal plains began only with the arrival of Dutch colonizers in the seventeenth century. The Dutch rule was short-lived, and in 1683, Taiwan was annexed by the conquest empire of the Great Qing, which had won control over the Chinese mainland. After two centuries of Qing rule, Taiwan was then ceded to Imperial Japan in 1895 following the latter’s victory in the First Sino-Japanese War. Although the new colonial overlords were the first to subjugate even the most inhospitable reaches of the island under metropolitan authority, Taiwan’s geography nevertheless meant that the bulk of its urban and industrial development was confined to the limited lowlands surrounding the mountains.

The Japanese made the effort to control the entire island because they were anomalous rulers in Taiwan’s history; they granted significant importance to the island’s management and development as a “model colony” of their expansionist empire. By contrast, the Qing before them had taken a distinctively passive approach and largely left the island to its own devices. Elements of that passivity were replicated when, following Japan’s defeat in World War II in 1945, Taiwan was

ceded to the ROC and then became its exile base in 1949. Despite having to make Taiwan its home, the ROC retained its claim to all of China and continued to operate the state apparatus of the Republic in which Taiwan was simply a peripheral frontier island. This focus on the mainland and the rulers' relative indifference toward Taiwan provided the impetus for the island's renegade cityscapes.

The emergence of cities characterized by informal and illegal construction began with an exodus. Taiwan's population saw an immediate and significant surge when the ROC was forced to uproot its government and bureaucracy on the mainland and reinstall them on the small island. In the turbulent period around 1949, as many as 1 to 2 million people emigrated to Taiwan along with the forces of the ROC's ruling Kuomintang (KMT) party (Liu 2013, 240). The newcomers predominantly settled around the urban areas on the plains, and no less than one-third eventually landed in the northwestern capital region of Taipei (Lin 2015, 16).

The sudden increase in urban population created an urgent need for accommodation, but the ROC government was in no position to implement a cohesive housing policy in the chaotic years after the Chinese Civil War and World War II (Chen and Bih 2014, 204). Moreover, because the KMT's gaze remained fixed on the mainland, its policies heavily prioritized military matters and the dual goals of fending off Communist invasion and planning the retaking of China (Chou et al. 2006, 54–55; La Grange, Chang, and Yip 2006, 62). In this thorny situation, the management of Taiwan was given a comparatively low priority.

The acute housing shortage and the government's inability to address it meant that many new urban residents were left to their own devices. Illegal squatter dwellings started appearing all over Taiwan's cities. As the island then began industrializing in the postwar years, these informal housing solutions further expanded with increasing rural-urban migration (Chen and Bih 2014, 205). For two decades until the mid-1970s, the government did very little to regulate this activity, creating a period of unchecked urban expansion that Chen and Bih (2014, 205) characterize as the *laissez-faire* era of Taiwan's housing policy. According to La Grange, Chang, and Yip (2006, 62), the government's role during this era was limited to the haphazard implementation of basic building and health regulations, some provision of utilities, and a small number of loans for housing construction.

The proliferation of illegal urban dwellings was concentrated wherever space was available, notably in parkland and waterfront areas. These areas gradually expanded into shantytowns that introduced a distinct form of urban informality into Taiwanese cityscapes from the 1960s onward (Chien 2018, 2891). Around these shantytowns, rapid population growth was transforming the entire character of the island. Between 1952 and 1975, the number of cities with a population over 50,000 increased from eleven to fifty-nine. By 1978, more than 63 percent of Taiwanese lived in cities, compared with only 24 percent in 1950 (Chou and Chang 2008, 69.) Around the Taipei region, the population grew from 1.5 to 4 million in just two decades between 1960 and 1980 (Lin 2015, 16).

In addition to sprouting the inevitable shantytowns, the rapid increase in population introduced Taiwanese cities to another marker of urban modernity: the condominium apartment. Condominiums started appearing in Taiwan's cities in the 1960s, and like housing and social policies in general, they were loosely regulated.

The first professional condominium management company was established only in the 1980s (Hsieh 2009, 73). The apartment blocks, typically mid-rise walk-ups with four or five floors, eventually replaced row houses as the predominant housing type. In 1962, row houses still accounted for 63.2 percent of the housing stock in Taipei, but by 1981, the percentage of mid-rise walk-ups had increased to 73.6. Although high-rise buildings proliferated in subsequent decades, the humble walk-ups still made up more than half of Taipei's housing in 2000 (Lin 2015, 16).

The unruly nature of Taiwan's urban development from the 1950s to the 1980s was a manifestation of a society overall fraught with social tension. The same preoccupation with the Chinese mainland that influenced the KMT's passive housing policies also bred general social discontent, and many Taiwanese quickly came to regard the ROC as little more than a new occupying regime. An antigovernment uprising had been harshly quelled in 1947, and when it became clear in 1949 that the ROC would have to retreat to Taiwan, the government put the island under martial law. It would last for thirty-eight years, until 1987, marking the longest-ever period of martial law in the world at the time. When a democratic Taiwan finally began to emerge from this authoritarian period in the late 1980s, its urban face was stricken with the visible physical marks of decades-long existential struggle.

Evolving Buildings

When left untended, environments quickly grow wild. This was the case with many of the mid-rise condominiums that had multiplied in Taiwanese cities from the 1960s onward. Those that were legal in base form often came to resemble the illegal squatter dwellings on the riversides, because their evolution did not stop with the signing off of the construction crews.

With the government reluctant to either finance or intervene with housing development, private developers and homeowners had considerable freedom to create and modify residential spaces at will. A private housing presale system was created to address financing issues, and an informal housing market emerged as a playground for builders without permits and architects without licenses (Chen and Bih 2014, 207). After houses were built and sold, their owners often modified them with informal extensions to further alleviate the population pressure in the overcrowded cities (Chien 2018, 2891). Two of the most prominent examples of these illegal extensions were rooftop additions and enclosed balconies, both of which addressed the problem of insufficient living space. The rooftop additions were the more notorious and malignant type of modification, and subsequent decades would see them become one of the defining features of Taiwan's cityscape.

In their most basic form, rooftop additions constitute extra floors or rooms built on top of mid-rise residential buildings with cheap materials, such as corrugated metal and plywood. Because these additions adhere to no building codes or safety regulations, they thus make for dangerous living spaces. Electrical fittings are installed secretly and often in an unsafe manner: an entire kitchen might be plugged into an extension cord from one ungrounded socket, and installations for air-conditioning and plumbing are often made incorrectly (Weston 2017). These makeshift fixtures can easily cause fires that spread quickly in the metal and wood

structures and across the narrow spaces between buildings. Proper fire escapes are almost always missing (“How Did It Happen? The Anatomy of Fengjia’s Deadly Gas Explosion” 2017; “Two Foreign Students Die in Rooftop Apartment Fire” 2017). The evolution of these structures does not always stop with a single extra floor; illegal additions may metastasize into sprawling multi-floor complexes with dozens of tiny rooms designed to maximize profit for the landlords. In a recent example, authorities seized and demolished a staggering complex of four extra floors built on top of a two-floor building and divided into no fewer than 158 small rental suites (“Zhe wu zhujiang 2 lou jiagai cheng 6 lou ge cheng 158 jian taofang chuzu” 2017).

Enclosed balconies address the lack of space in a different manner. They are made into rooms by closing the open space with windows, steel grilles, or both. Modern-style balconies became commonplace in Taiwanese cities together with the condominiums that emerged in the 1960s, but people were often dissatisfied with them; they were too small, other buildings blocked the sunlight, they were too hot in the summer, and rainwater made them wet. Consequently, residents frequently improvised their use based on utility rather than leisure. This practical approach was also apparent in balcony design; balconies were often intended as spaces for washing and drying clothes and provided little use for recreational purposes, due to old building codes restricting their depth to one meter, or a little over a yard (Lin 2015, 13–14). These aspects, combined with the lack of space and a traditional emphasis on privacy among Taiwanese residents, encouraged the practice of enclosing the balconies. Windows were also frequently barricaded with metal bars for burglary protection, and many of the metal enclosures protruded from the walls to provide space for hanging laundry and growing potted plants.

Although these illegal extensions were often inevitable solutions to insufficient living space, they also exacerbated the problem. Population growth and lack of regulation had produced residential areas where buildings were erected very close to each other, and the informal modifications further blocked the narrow spaces between them. Much like in slums, this proximity created a seemingly unified mass of concrete and steel in which individual buildings became almost indistinguishable. Unfortunately, the tight fit has posed even more hazards, because enclosures around balconies and windows may block fire lanes (Sui 2015), and the insufficient space between buildings increases vibrations during earthquakes, making the buildings more prone to collapse (Weston 2017). In another geographic twist of fate, Taiwan happens to lie in the seismically active Pacific Ring of Fire and is thus affected by frequent tremors.

Fruits of Passivity

From the mid-1970s onward, the government started adopting a more active stance with regard to housing. For example, the Public Housing Act of 1975 aimed to address the situation by building one hundred thousand units of public housing. However, even with this newfound focus on housing policy, the authorities discovered that they had limited ability to implement their plans.

A key obstacle was that most of Taiwan’s urban land was privately held, making land acquisition expensive. This cost factor meant that the new apartments,

ostensibly built for the low-income families who needed them, were priced too high and bought instead by consumers with higher incomes. It also meant that most of Taiwan's public housing was built for sale instead of rent (Chen and Bih 2014, 209). As the direct provision of housing proved complicated, the government resorted to an understandable but problematic tactic: instead of enforcing regulations on the illegal buildings that had inundated the cities, policymakers chose to ease restrictions and retroactively legalize existing self-constructed buildings (La Grange, Chang, and Yip 2006, 63).

With these prevailing conditions, informal structures continued to define Taiwan's urbanization throughout the 1980s. It was only in the early 1990s that the government began to take more decisive steps to curb illegal construction. Key developments took place in 1995 with the passing of the Condominium Administration Act, described as the "constitution for residential housing" (Chang 2015, 91), and new rules governing illegal buildings, such as the Regulations for the Handling of Illegal Structures in Taipei. But although the regulations stated that new illegal constructions in the capital city would be demolished once reported, they also conceded that those built before 1994 would face demolition only if they threatened public safety, breached sanitation laws, or conflicted with new plans (Chien 2018, 2891). Similar exemptions for existing buildings were put into place in other cities as well (Sui 2015).

Granting amnesty to existing illegal structures solidified their place as permanent features of Taiwanese cities. In the case of new or overly hazardous buildings, the crux of the issue switched from regulation to enforcement. This is where pressing questions linger today. It is one thing to announce the illegality of ramshackle structures but an altogether different hurdle to actually tear them down. According to Sui (2015), a central problem is that mass demolition campaigns would amount to political suicide for the policymakers. Over half a century of state acquiescence has made illegal buildings so commonplace that the people inhabiting them today represent a key demographic in any politician's voter base.

Another facet of the issue is that although the areas with illegal additions resemble slums, many of their owners and residents are middle-class. Both rooftop additions and enclosed balconies are often created by and for middle-class citizens and therefore do not represent the ills of extreme poverty (Lin 2015, 11–12; Sui 2015.) The price range reflects this fact: landlords in Taipei often rent out tiny rooftop rooms and subdivided apartments for as much as NT\$5,000–7,000 (US\$164–230) (Weston 2017). In one egregious example, a landlord charged NT\$5,000 for an enclosed balcony of 6.6 square meters (just over 2.5 square feet) used as a little room with an air-conditioner and a small mattress ("Taiwan ju da buyi! Yangtai gejian yuezu 5000 yuan..." 2017). Despite the seemingly raw deal, the landlord quickly found a tenant.

The high prices reflect a general trend in Taiwan's housing market. A key factor that continues to encourage illegal building is the combination of skyrocketing housing prices and a strikingly small percentage of public housing. As a lingering sign of the passive housing policies, only about 5 percent of all housing in Taiwan is provided by the government (Chou et al. 2006, 62), and as little as 0.08 percent constitutes public rental housing (Chen and Bih 2014, 204). Meanwhile, the prices of

the mostly market-based apartments have risen sharply during the 2000s: from 2005 to 2014, Taiwan's average housing prices increased by 70 percent. Reasons for the rising prices include returning Taiwanese overseas capital, low-interest rates on mortgages, a law allowing Chinese nationals to buy houses in Taiwan, and the good investment value of housing (Chen 2015.)

Due to these factors, the scale of the illegal construction issue remains formidable to this day. In 2017, the government reported a total of 667,000 illegal structures across the island, most of which were in the greater Taipei area: 192,000 in New Taipei City and 98,000 in Taipei itself ("Two Foreign Students Die in Rooftop Apartment Fire" 2017). The actual number may be much greater, and according to some estimates, about 22,000 illegal rooms are still built per year despite the legislation that explicitly bans them (Weston 2017). With such numbers, any attempts to remake Taiwan's urban character are bound to be slow and complicated.

Blazes and Promises

Although illegal buildings persist, there have also been successful removal and redevelopment campaigns. An often-cited example and a sign of the renewed focus of the early 1990s was the demolition of a notable squatter settlement in central Taipei's Da'an District to make way for Da'an Forest Park in 1994 (Weston 2017). More recently, Taipei's maverick mayor Ko Wen-je has signalled a general willingness to deal with illegal structures. In 2015, Taipei's city government gave a high-profile ultimatum on 226 buildings with illegal rooftop additions that would be demolished unless the owners made improvements to building safety within two months. The improvements were made, and the buildings were saved ("Beishi 226 wei jian gaishan wancheng buyong Ke Wenzhe chaile" 2015).

Despite such efforts, however, significant hazards remain. In November 2017, nine people died in a fire that destroyed the top three floors of a building in New Taipei City. As is often the case, the fifth floor was an illegal addition, and all three destroyed floors had been subdivided into several small studio apartments. New Taipei City's mayor Eric Chu called for stricter implementation and interpretation of laws and regulations, and the calls were further echoed in the media (Li 2017). A similar incident that killed one person in Taipei in the same month prompted Ko Wen-je to announce new demolition plans that also signalled a willingness to ignore the earlier exemptions to pre-1994 buildings if necessary (Everington 2017). Indeed, demolition teams in Taipei and New Taipei City began taking action in December 2017, but questions remained whether this activity would amount to more than a cosmetic campaign designed to show that the authorities were doing something (Weston 2017).

Political statements and media commentary in recent years indicate a consensus that the safety issues of illegal buildings warrant serious attention. However, the scale of the issue still dwarfs the measures taken. Deadly blazes, the most worrisome reminder of the persistent problem, continue to occur: in November 2019, a fire killed four people in a three-story building in Pingtung. Steel grilles on windows hampered the escape-and-rescue efforts, but firefighters managed to save two children from the illegally built third floor after cutting their

way through the metal bars (“Pingdong tiepi jiajai minzhai dahuo 3 da 1 xiao sangming” 2019).

Ultimately, the illegal structures themselves are simply a symptom of wider and more profound societal issues related to economic disparity, affordability, commodification, and the overall passive role of the state as a provider of housing. Much of the state’s past passivity, at least in the early postwar decades, was probably an unavoidable consequence of Taiwan’s troubled geopolitical status. Although many of those underlying uncertainties remain, Taiwan’s society has since matured to a point at which tangible improvements hinge more on the state’s willingness to tackle the issue than its ability to do so. In any case, the unruly informal structures will likely continue to characterize Taiwan’s urban environments in the foreseeable future. They exist as a visual and physical reminder of the island’s fast, wild, and tense entry into postwar modernity.

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