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Exhibiting Tightness: Qualities of the Hyper-Dense City in Asia

Abstract

The Super Tight refers to the small, intense, robust and hyper-condensed spaces that emerge as a by-product of extreme levels of urban density. Tightness arises as consequence of density, but tightness itself is not density. Tightness is a series of social, economic and cultural practices that have developed in cities as a response to the rapid growth and consolidation of cities.

These ideas have been explored currently through the development of a curated, site specific installation and exhibition at the RMIT Design Hub gallery, July-September 2019. The proposed paper will be developed concurrently, both as a tool of critical reflection on the work being done, but also speculation upon of the broader impact and implications of the exploration.

While architectural models of density have been heavily explored, this project will investigate the culture of tightness that has emerged in Asian cities over the past 30 years, and the role that designers play in the material and social behaviours of tightness. We will speculate on what causes density, how to dense cities become tight, and how has a culture of tightness emerged.

If more than half the world lives in cities, more than half the world lives in Asia, more than half of the world's megacities are in Asia, then Asian cities are a key to new ways of being tightly urbanised. The by-product of unprecedented metropolitan convergence will be the emergence of new urbanisms and new architectures, new models for living and making culture.

To be tight is to be small and constrained, but also to be open to the economies and social intimacy of being close. This exhibition project aims to unpack and convey both the delight and difficulty that emerges through the close occupation of large cities.

A Tight Introduction

This paper is about the term tightness applied to cities, as examined through the curation of the exhibition named Supertight. The curation of creative works in that show, and the conversations between ourselves as curators, and with contributors has shaped observations on what might constitute the tight city. The term Supertight refers not just to the extreme of tight, but to its positive; a condensation of good and tight.

The project was motivated by a desire to move beyond tired discussions of density; as something necessary but undesirable, or at least only desirable in limited frameworks. Flipping that logic and thinking of tightness as pure benefit with no upper limit, might test some of those question of density.

There are several obvious reasons to reduce the footprint we inhabit; not just logistical or environmental but social, as we begin to understand that the contemporary impacts of isolation outstrip the industrial age effects of overcrowding.¹ The modern discipline of city planning (and by implication modern architecture) has profound problems with such propositions; built as it is in on the project of organising and dispersing components of urban life away from each other. Just as modern economics strives toward a bigger pie, it is difficult to uncouple affluence from overcoming tightness as constraint. We might start by thinking of the word tight like a band of musicians would, or a pair of close friends would.

The Super Tight refers to small, intense, robust and hyper-condensed spaces that emerge as by-products of extreme urban density. Tightness arises as a consequence of density but is more than density. Tightness captures social, economic and cultural practices that have developed in cities as a response to their rapid growth and consolidation.

To be tight is to be small and perhaps constrained, but also to be open to the economies and social intimacy of being close. This project aims to unpack both the delight and difficulty that emerges through close occupation in large cities.

Addressing these questions through a spatial and visual exhibition is to avoid prescribing through policy. The study's data is not statistical but visual; qualitative observations. The works of the exhibition are evidence of the tight occupation of cities, but not explanations of it. The ideas and arguments of the project are drive from reflection on the creative works exhibited.

Most of the contributors, and the curators of the exhibition are designers; the observations are charged with making of the city; the division between the lived and the built is blurry; as is the division between the speculative and the empirical. It does therefore always ask: what is the role of the designer? Where is it limited? What does tightness produce?

Questions of the supertight also ask the counterfactual: what if the role of designing cities was to produce (or at least facilitate) maximum tightness?

Urbanisation and Density in Asian Cities

We live in a period of unprecedented urbanisation. For the first time, more than half the world's population live in cities.² The fastest growing contemporary urban type is the mega city, defined as a city of greater than ten million. By 2050 we are projected to have more than 50 mega cities,³ the majority of which will be in Asia. The world's densest cities, which are almost all Asian⁴ have been consolidated through the absorption of massive population growth over the last 50 years. As this trend accelerates, the design of dense environments, and understanding its consequences will become increasingly important for architecture and creative practice.

Huge population often does not create urban density, and density (described as a measure of people or dwellings per square kilometre), does not necessarily equate to tightness. Tightness is often a by-product of density, however the two conditions remain correlative rather than causally related. Dense urban environments support the creation of tightness, but not all dense cities are tight. Density is often understood as a problem of planning to be negotiated or managed away; tightness however, can be considered qualitatively. It sits apart from the pressing pragmatics of housing populations and is intertwined with an intimate urban community.

The Supertight project has focused on east Asian cities. That is not to suggest that the project is about that region or particular cities, but that it is a useful and rich laboratory of the super tight. It is the region experiencing the fastest urbanisation and is thus an intense testing ground for the 21st century. Asian cities both prove the exception to western ideas of the urban, and are adopting/mutating those western models. Most importantly, the clichés of the Tokyo subway crush or the chaotic Bangkok traffic need to be considered in relation to lived realities and emerging models of hyper dense cities. The metropolises of Tokyo and Ho Chi Minh City form useful benchmarks to our project; containing both strong parallels and diverging characteristics. Both contain intense examples of intricate density, constructed in the wake of massive upheaval. The time difference in this post-war reconstruction might describe the different trajectories of economic development, but the characteristics of

informality in Vietnam compared to Japan amplify the difference of these cities. Just as Hong Kong embodies built intelligence in the hyper-vertical, these cities each form varied and useful models of the super tight.

Exhibition as a mode of research

This research was carried out through the design and curation of a major gallery exhibition; the method of investigation initiated through competitive selection process. Following the proposal selection, we undertook a twelve month conceptual development of curatorial questions and positions of the project. These developed through speculative dialogue and writing by the curatorial team.

A list of potential contributors was prepared; architects, designers and artists working throughout Asia were invited to submit works (existing or purpose-made) responding to a series of key curatorial questions framed around urban density and speculations on the 'super tight.' A series of conversations supported this (online and face to face), in which the curators discussed proposed works and key exhibition issues, attempting to expand our understanding of the terrain through the works as critical response to the curatorial framework.

We concurrently designed interior installations for the gallery. These serve as both environment for exhibiting and examining the contributors' works, and as works exploring the particular spatial or organisational qualities of the 'super tight.' Two key objects, the Tight Bar and the Tight Hem, abstractions of a Shibuya drinking hole and a Saigon living laneway were placed inside the gallery as an environment for events and a tactic to disrupt the scale of the gallery. The intent was to create a tactile and immersive quality, and to examine the particular abstractions of these urban models of tightness.

Despite conceptual biases of the exhibition, these were not intended as didactic demonstrations of a particular position. Instead the exhibition is intended as an environment for debate; a venue for reflecting on and elaborating conceptual positions. The open-ended, on-site conversations and the design process of making the venues formed a method for this multi-headed elaboration. some key threads that have emerging from this process follow here.

Forces, Causes and Emergence of Tightness

Through the curatorial discussions and exhibition contributions, the phenomena of the 'super tight' were understood through an historical lens. Despite their sometimes surreal

proportions, the emergence of hyper-density in Asia is often described as an entirely inevitable consequence of independent historical forces. The contingent nature of city growth is reconstructed as a collective and natural decisions of a society.

For example, the extremely cellular form of Tokyo, comprised of small, single detached housing, originates in property laws enacted during the Meiji restoration in the 1860s. To establish a modern taxation system, the government disbanded collective land structures and gave priority to private land ownership.⁵ This principle has persisted over the last 150 years, and now heavily influences the urban form of the city. Land owners are given extraordinary rights over their property, and shared ownership is assiduously avoided. The ubiquitous 50cm setback zone between small houses that permeates Tokyo amplifies this. Coupled with inheritance tax structures and short building life spans it has bred a city of small volumetric cells, which each generation metabolises into smaller and smaller parts.⁶



Figure 1. *Vo Thi Sau* by Graham Crist. Image shows an example of a Tube House in Ho Chi Minh City.

Similarly, the tube houses famously associated with Vietnamese cities were the product of an ancient tax law that calculated property owners' contribution based on the width of its ground.

'To minimise the tax, lots were designed to be as narrow as possible, typically about three to four metres maximum, and sometimes as narrow as just two metres wide.'¹⁷

What started as one or two storey shop houses have absorbed the massive influx of residents into the city and large extended families to exponentially grow into become the extraordinary network of tiny towers lining the streets of the city today.



Figure 2. Image from Rasquchismo Landscape Series by Archie Pizzini. Image shows an typical 'Hem' or alleyway. This type of urban formation is where much of the commercial, cultural and community life of Ho Chi Minh City takes place.

Drawing contributions from varied cities in Asia, the exhibition has been able to identify a series of processes and circumstances that have led to density, and the impact on the way tightness is understood and negotiated. Vietnam and Japan have been significantly shaped by old taxation structures, and now have divergent property ownership structures (Japan providing outright land ownership vs no freehold titles in Vietnam). Interestingly despite the very different of land use regimes, there is similar familiarity with spatial density in Saigon and Tokyo. Both host extreme density that has mainly played out through individual buildings, with exterior spaces of the city condensed from the fragments of land that are either left in between land parcels, or which service the city infrastructure. It is perhaps a

paradox that the super-fast reconstruction that both cities experienced after the chaos of war forms part of the narrative of the unplanned and incremental development of their places. As though a ground up and distributed reforming of the city, replaced, by necessity a centralised master plan.

Formal Expressions of Tightness

Tightness here can connote smallness or austerity. Some of the exhibition works explore conditions of density via the visual quality of formal aggregation in super tight urban environments, independent from inhabited density.

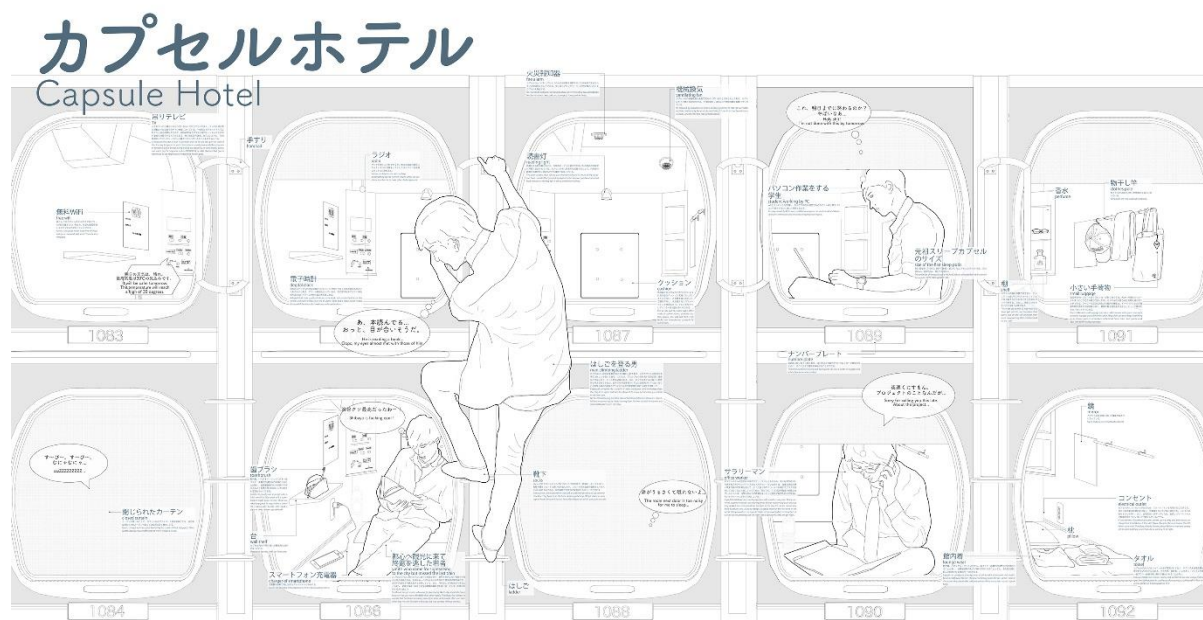


Figure 3. 'Capsule Hotel' from Tight Density, Tight Familiarity, Overlapping City by Taishin Shiozaki Laboratory.

In Taishin Shiozaki's installation 'Tight Density, Tight Familiarity, Overlapping City', he explores familiar dense settings in Tokyo. Comprising of a series of six large scale linework drawings, it documents scenarios of intense spatial tightness or occupational density. Shiozaki describes the capsule hotel building type as being comparable to many other ultra-dense urban phenomena, such as the Kowloon Walled City in Hong Kong, each being comprised of 'a large volume of objects [that] are aggregated close together.'



Figure 4. Image from 'Collage City' series by Desirée Grunewald.

Both Shiozaki, and Desirée Grunewald's 'Collage City' series, describe this condition as one of material 'overlapping'. For Shiozaki this is more closely connected to inhabitation and occupation. For Grunewald the material qualities of these have their own inherent tight values. Her work explores the Hems⁸ of Ho Chi Minh City through a series of layered digital collages that observe and describe the highly nuanced and luminous walls that line these alleys.



Figure 5. Still frame from 'Middleman Episode One' by New Office Works.

Hong Kong practice New Office Works explores the material cultures of the city's extreme density through a film series entitled 'Middle Man Hong Kong.' The series describes the city through its history of cultural and economic mediation (middle man) between east and west. The outcome is a saturated landscape of contradictory elements which New Office works argue are represented of the cultural density that has accompanied Hong Kong's growth. These creative documentary works suggest that a tight urban environment is one where the visual and formal appearance of a city has not been subjected to constraint or removal, but rather is one in which the operations of the city have been expressed in response directly. Reflections on these works suggest a formal language of density that transcends original functional requirements to become something that has its own cultural and spatial value.

Tightness by Size and by Culture

An insight of the supertight project is that tight does not always mean small. Scale is key to understanding what constitutes tightness, though it is culturally relative. The expectation that small spaces are an inevitable outcome of urban intensification, and the value of design to co-opt these situations and produce new forms of urban occupation is open to question. This is clearly important Tightness is a notion which aims at interactions between smallness and its cultural underpinnings.

Discussions of density default to large urban centres. Yet within the rural countryside particularly in Japan, there are pockets of dense, tight living environments. Measured

population per area is low compared to cities, yet residential settlements are constrained along narrow bands of land between rice cultivation and mountainous land-forms with neither housing nor farming. Rural villages of rice cultivation (once extremely labour intensive) usually do not have highly cellular urban subdivisions. Japanese rural housing types evolved from the Minka; a large farm house where multiple family generations or multiple households tightly live; often alongside livestock. Contemporary housing follows more suburban architectural language, yet cultural expectations of very close living within single dwellings persist. While rural population in Japan has steadily declined over the last fifty years of urbanisation, there remains strong connections to ancestral origins. Returning to one's home town during the Obon festival in summer, or New Year holiday, houses once again becomes intensely inhabited with multiple generations of family.

Extending this to the scale of the metropolis there is comparable, time specific intensity in the occupation of space. Huge crowds moving through Asian cities have become clichéd scenes. Tokyo's iconic station 'pushers' have taken the concept of the peak hour crush to extreme, surreal levels. The obvious explanation for this phenomenon is the large population and density of Tokyo, yet much of greater Tokyo is relatively decentralised and its density and is not extreme. There is a level of cultural tolerance for tight occupation and compression that enables the extreme closeness of occupation in such cities.

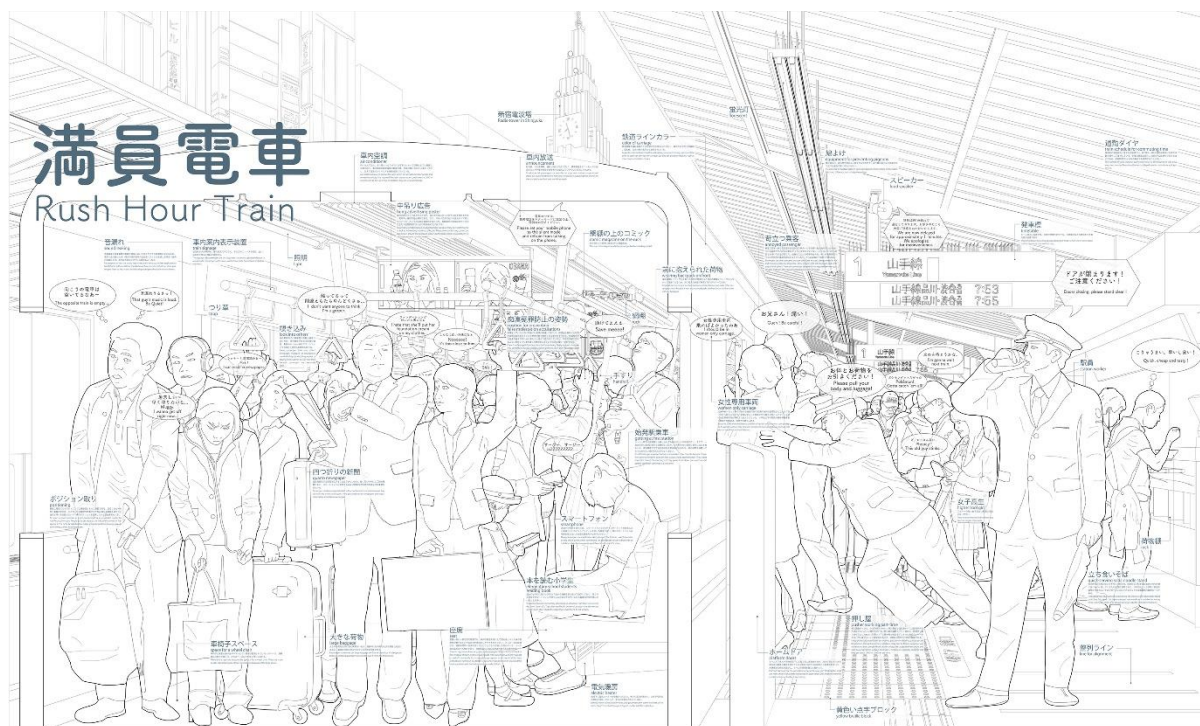


Figure 6. 'Rush Hour Train' from Tight Density, Tight Familiarity, Overlapping City by Taishin Shiozaki Laboratory.

In *Tight Density, Tight Familiarity, Overlapping City* Shiozaki illustrates scenarios of familiar density and occupying the city at extremely close quarters. One such scene, of the rush hour train, describes in detail the components and qualities of this experience. Drawn in Manga comic strip style, its narrative is expressed through character speech and thought bubbles that populate the scene. Perhaps most revealing are the projected thoughts of people occupying the train. Speculations without psychological evidence, these words are however drawn by people who live these urban experiences daily. This work describes extreme tolerance for tightly packed crowds. None of the 'actors' appear to enjoy the experience, but there is an acceptance and resolve (acknowledge gender issues notwithstanding) that enables this to occur without disruption.

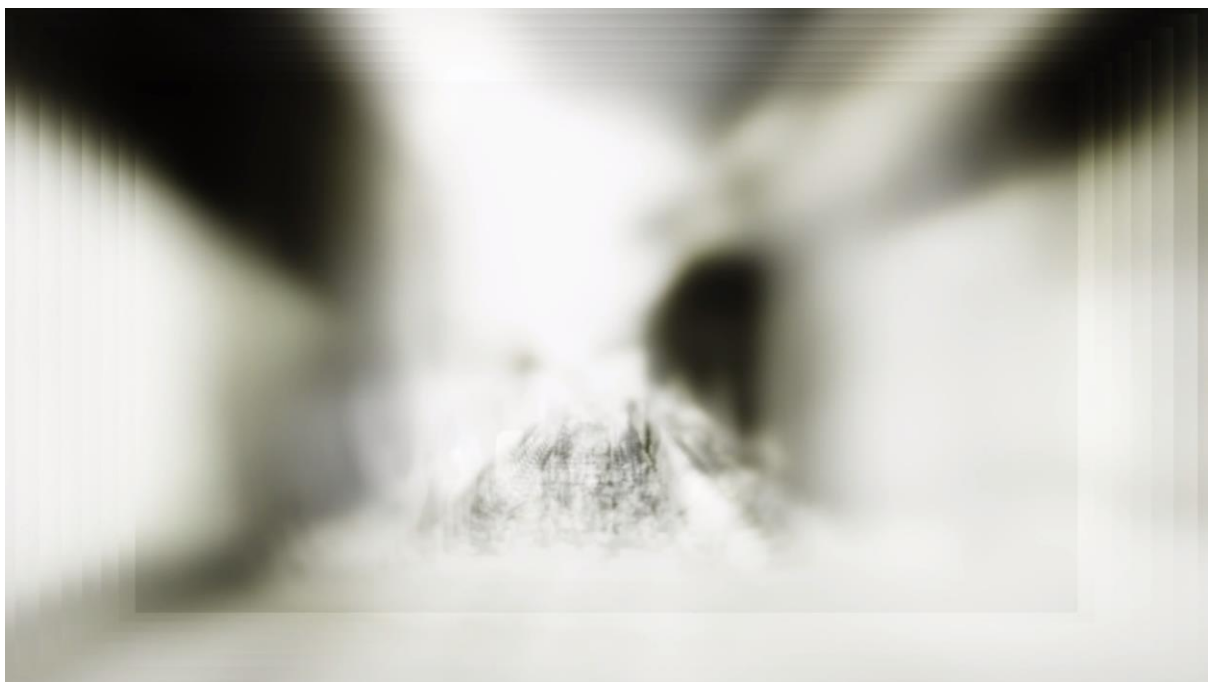


Figure 7. Still frame from 'Hem Walk' by Andrew Stiff.

In his experimental films for the Ho Chi Minh City Hem Archive project, Andrew Stiff has drawn similar conclusions around the social expectations of people living and working in the city's Hems. Most have been shot using non-realistic techniques, with multiple exposures and filters overlaid to saturate movement and activity framed by the physical borders of the Hem space. The works capture the congestion and overlap, not only of individual moments, but of cycles of use across the day. Stiff discusses a series of activities playing out across the day with multiple vendors, residents, visitors and other users occupying the same space. What appears to be random or chaotic, is upon closer inspection a carefully negotiated and choreographed series of social, cultural and economic exchanges.

“The fluidity of the spatial program as demonstrated in the hems of District 4 offers socially based solutions to urban problems whose scale is too small for the urban planner, or of no interest to the developer.”⁹



Figure 8. ‘Cherry-blossom Viewing’ from Tight Density, Tight Familiarity, Overlapping City by Taishin Shiozaki Laboratory.

Both the Hem and the peak hour train show social calibrations allowing the use of compressed or physically ‘tight’ spaces. Cultures of tightness in cities allow us to inhabit the very small, but they can also suggest the intensification of large or ‘loose’ spaces, which then perform in tight ways. Shiozaki demonstrates this through the Hannami or ‘Cherry Blossom Viewing’ drawing in his installation. This public park scene depicts the Cherry Blossom Viewing party, a traditional event held amongst friends or colleagues involving a picnic under Sakura Cherry Trees. A public park, not typically a location for density; (even in Japan these remain fairly empty for most of the year), hosts the extremely short annual life span of the Sakura blossom. The ubiquity of this super brief ritual gives rise to bizarre situations of vast numbers of people eagerly congregating in huge numbers alongside one another, turning open space into scenes of extreme density.

This process of intermittent intensification for varied activities is consistent through a number of environments explored through the exhibition. Shiozaki describes this as occupational ‘overlapping.’; a culture of tightness beyond metrics of density, which enables the use of

small spaces, and the tight occupation of otherwise loose spaces, with a layered use across time.

Dialogues Between Built and Social Tightness

Observations of tight cities often drift between their rich social life and the physical scale which contains them; between fine scaled interactions in urban space, and the finely wrought buildings which form their backdrop. The relationship between the two is obviously loose or fuzzy. For the debates of the supertight, and for practical purposes the distinction is less important than the interaction between the two; it is critical that one is not driven by the other. This is both a critique and a recognition of architecture's capacity to shape the social environment, or of the social planner's ability to determine a social environment and plan accordingly. The Shiozaki images of urban life in Tokyo foreground its overlapping social exchanges, and carefully calibrated human exchanges. For an architect, it is the environment that makes this possible, and its interaction is the object of Shiozaki's observation. Conversely, Desiree Grunewald's images of Saigon Hems are intensely social without depicting people in the urban scene. Not only do they personify the architectural objects in the scene, but they tacitly claim that the built objects are a record of human activity. The famous sections of Atelier Bow-Wow's *Graphic Anatomy* capture this symbiotic relationship; the co-dependence rather than the determination of one over the other. That symbiosis is a crucial ingredient of tightness, and cannot be contained either by master planning or a romantic, organic notion of urban occupation.

The cultural psychologist Michele Gelfand describes loose cultures and tight cultures in terms of tolerance to deviation.¹⁰ While we use the term tight quite differently here, there is often a correlating assumption that with urban density comes a conformity and narrowing of permissible activities. This seems pronounced in the modern western world, where loose space or lower density is associated with social freedom. The subtlety of this relationship is crucial to the understanding of the super tight; the search for social freedom within physical closeness; an uncoupling of density from a conception of social suppression. Tightness might be manifest in a social convention to make less noise (in a Tokyo train); or a social convention to be unbothered by noise (on a motorbike in Saigon). Each are antithetical forms with the same end; reconciling with close proximity in urban space.

Ingenuity and Rasquachismo

A recurring theme in discussions of the tight city, and on its observations, is the ingenuity of inhabitation and the capacity for adjustment of the built environment. Living at a smaller scale demands greater precision and capacity to adapt. That is, both adapt to (learn to inhabit

dense spaces) and adapt for (learn to adjust or reshape one's physical environment). The by-products of urban tightness are the finely adjusted and sometimes ingenious social practices or physical objects which make life work tightly.



Figure 9. Image from Rasquachismo Landscape Series by Archie Pizzini.

The architect and photographer Archie Pizzini uses the term Rasquachismo, drawn from Mexican culture, but evident anywhere where people re-purpose junk, fabricate from leftovers, and fashion whatever it is at hand. Rasquachismo often refers to handcrafts and is even a term of derision attached to poverty, but Pizzini sees it as immensely useful, admirable, and most importantly scalable to the architectural or urban environment. In a top down, large scale, or policy framed view of the city, tiny acts of rasquachismo are rarely recorded or recognised. In a city like Saigon, two wildly different models of urbanism sit closely side by side; that of the Vietnamese Hem, and the 20th century high rise. Even where the density of each model is comparable, and even though the physical scale is obviously dilated in the tower, the most pronounced difference is the capacity to alter and adjust. A question still to be tested perhaps is whether tower apartment models are inherently difficult to make adjustable, or whether this fixity is built in to their modes of ownership, or whether it is simply age that is required for the creeping in of development of adjustments, We should continue to speculate; despite the tendency of these types to appear as instant, and their unalterable completeness as a mark of their prestige. It is the capacity to incrementally re-

work and re-fashion urban spaces, at the scale of individual inhabitation, which makes them tight.

Towards Conclusions

How do we differentiate the supertight from the hyper dense? Our use of the term tight might simply be an aesthetic of the dense, and the supertight exhibition a form of evidence for the existence, viability, success and pleasures of urban tightness. While the benefits of physical urban density may be clear and measurable, those benefits are generally resisted while they are conceived as contrary to the desires of the good city.

A tight city is one which has reconciled itself with its density. That is, a city where the mode of inhabiting or the mode of using the city, has adapted to the physical density, where the ingenuity of its users and designers is directed to capitalising on that density. This is in opposition to the design or planning task of countering or limiting density, or of imagining it as simply more floor in less space. The term tight in this use, infers to a precision or alignment. Such a definition of the super tight advocates adjustment and adaption, and against master planning which fixes the details. The disciplines that plan cities carry a legacy, driven by the task of ameliorating density, and of conceiving cities as new. The super tight presents a dilemma for this conception. The evidence for super tight urban space in the Asian region, as described in the exhibition, is of spaces which have been incrementally tightened at small scale. The time taken for the incremental, and the armature required for this adjustment, suggests the cities we already have, for all their flaws, are the only place where this can happen.

Architects working toward the tight city have an agency beyond the role grand planner; a role from which they have generally been removed anyway. This agency is best described as creating evidence for the super tight; making ways of seeing the hyper dense as beneficial. The responsibility of the designer in that context too, is to properly observe the tight city as found, to acknowledge its carefully adjusted boundaries and its locally made small incisions. The visual and spatial language of the Super tight exhibition is both a celebration of and a provocation for a particular type of urban space. It operates as a mobile archive for urban tightness, and as a venue for debating the numerous viewpoints present in that archive. It is therefore a form of knowledge complimentary to the quantitative data, technologies and policies which equally shape cities.

Endnotes

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