

# STINT TEACHING SABBATICAL – FINAL REPORT

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Urban Studies Programme

at The Chinese University of Hong Kong



Community Design Work. Urban Design Master Programme, CUHK

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## **The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) in brief**

Founded in 1963, CUHK is the second oldest university in Hong Kong. Located in the New Territories, away from the city core, CUHK is a large and very green campus of more than 130 ha situated on a hilly site overlooking Tolo Harbour. The campus provides a calm and clean learning environment away from the hustle and bustle of the mega-city life in Hong Kong's central areas such as Kowloon and Hong Kong Island.

CUHK is the only university in Hong Kong in which the higher education is closely connected to a college system (of totally 9 colleges) that contributes to provide a holistic education and a close relationship between students, teachers and alumni.

CUHK has eight faculties: Art, Business and Administration, Education, Engineering, Law, Medicine, Science, and Social Science. There is also a Graduate School offering postgraduate programmes leading to masters and doctoral degrees. During the STINT's sabbatical semester I was employed to teach at the Urban Studies Programme, a multi-disciplinary undergraduate programme co-organised by two departments within the Faculty of Social Science: The Department of Geography and Resource Management (GRM) and the School of Architecture. The GRM was my host institution during.

## **Preparation and the planning week**

I was very excited receiving the news of the STINT scholarship and started writing to my academic contacts at CUHK immediately. I was a bit worried not to hear from them for several days but with some help from Christopher Carlsson at STINT I got in touch with the Office of Academic Links (OAL) as well as from my main academic contact at CUHK.

The planning trip took place in early April and was very efficiently organised by the OAL. The meeting with my main academic contact at CUHK, a professor in human geography, went very well. We agreed to co-teach two courses in the Urban Study Program, a multi-disciplinary undergraduate program co-organised by the Department of Geography and Natural Resources and the School of Architecture at CUHK. The courses are built somewhat similar to the courses I have in Malmö and we have similar academic references so we had very easy and effective discussions regarding the courses' organisation, contents and literature.

During my planning week in Hong Kong, another course in the Urban Studies Programme had a final presentation and I was invited to be part of the critique committee. This was a great introduction to the programme and gave me some useful first insights into the course's content, pedagogical approach, as well as some initial ideas of the students' capacity. Through

the participation in this presentation and a social lunch hosted by the Head of the Department of Geography, I was also introduced to meet several other teachers in the program.

To look for a place to stay proved to be more challenging. The apartment offered by CUHK was not an attractive option since it did not provide the possibility to prepare food. Ms. Olivia Kwok at the OAL was very helpful and took me to see some serviced apartments in Ma On Shan but we could not land any rental agreement at the time. The managements of these serviced apartments did not want to make so earlier a commitment and told us to contact them again in June or July for a definitive answer. This was very discouraging. I heard that these apartments are attractive for sharing between several mainland students. They often pay in advance for the whole year and thus more attractive for the managements than short-term tenants like me.

I left Hong Kong still unable to find an accommodation solution. It did not feel good to have to wait until June or July for the accommodation problem to be solved. I took contact with Per Nilsen who is the other STINT scholarship holder at CUHK and asked for tips. Per gave me a very useful link to a site that connects most serviced apartments in Hong Kong and it was through this site that I found my apartment in the heart of Mong Kok. There are many serviced apartments in Hong Kong but the majority of these are located in Hong Kong Island, which is really far away from CUHK, so the Mong Kok location half way between Hong Kong Island and CUHK was good. It is a very vibrant area where everything you need is close at hand.

The area offers a quick introduction to Hong Kong and its fascinating diversity, hence a great area to stay for a new comer to Hong Kong.

Later in the fall, I found out that another visiting scholar from India could indeed rent in June one of the serviced apartment alternatives that I have looked in my visit in April. So there seems to be a chance for those who wait, if you can live with uncertainty for a few months. Those serviced apartments Ma On Shan and Hung Hom are nearer to the Chinese University, and they offer a quieter living environment, but they are somewhat more isolated from the city core and do not offer the same urban vibe as my apartment in Mong Kok.

### **Teaching duty**

As mentioned above my duty at CUHK was to co-teach two courses together with a CUHK faculty. These are foundation courses at the Urban Studies programme. One course (Urban Sustainability) is at an introductory level and the other course (Planning theory and Practice) is

for third year's students. This provided me with a good insight into the subject content and students' capacity across the academic years.

The teaching loads for the courses were shared equally between my co-teacher and me. I provided half of the course's lectures and took care of the marking of half of the assignments. We worked on the formulation on the assignments and the examination questions together and we decided about the forms and contents for the seminars and the practical sessions together. The CUHK teacher was open about trying new methods and we agreed to run the literature seminar the way we did in Malmö. Maybe my share is somewhat less than 50% because the CUHK teacher was mainly responsible for student contacts.

My lectures were placed in the later half of the semester. I believe this has two reasons. One is the sequence of the course's content. The other, maybe more important reasons, is that the first month is the so called add/drop period so maybe the CUHK teacher wants to make sure that the course goes according to how she envisions it to be, in order not to have so many drop off. This is my guess. It may be good for future scholar to be aware about this.

It was good for me to have time at the beginning of the semester to carefully prepare my lectures. Giving lectures about urban issues (especially that of the physical environment) in a new context requires that me to update my knowledge about the local context of the topics in order to have relevant examples that students can relate to. This meant that I spent a lot of time exploring the city's physical environments and reading academic literature about Hong Kong to collect examples of relevant urban projects to be used in my lectures.

Since the courses can be chosen by students studying other majors as well, the student groups were quite mixed: apart from planning students, we had students with majors in history or public administration or economy. In terms of academic background, the student group was thus more diverse than those I used to have at my home university in Malmö, but the students are very well-disciplined so I did not experience any difficulty because of this. The uneven level of English is somewhat a problem, as it made it difficult to gauge the student's true ability. Students who are poor in oral presentation can be very good in writing. Chinese students were on the whole rather quiet in class, and those who were poor in English were even more quiet so it was difficult to start a discussion in class.

In both courses, there is a Teaching Assistant (TA) whose task was to lead the practical sessions (also called the tutorials), grade the students' participation, organize field trips, make photocopies and upload the reading materials, run course evaluations, and compile the various grades of the various assignments into a final mark. It was such a luxury to get help with all

the mundane jobs with the running of the course. I discussed with the TAs on the content and setting up of the practical sessions and I valued their inputs since they have a better knowledge of the university system and of the students. Furthermore, the TAs were present at all the lectures and served as a good reference point for a new teacher like me. Their presence in the classroom gave me some orientation, to sense whether or not things were heading in the right direction. Both TAs are doctorate students and it was also good to talk to them and learn about the situations of doctorate students at CUHK. I met the female TA quite a lot outside class also and it was very nice to acquire some insight into a young person's life in Hong Kong. It seems however unusual at CUHK that a faculty socialize with their TAs. The hierarchy at CUHK seems to be strict and I could see that my co-teacher did not "discuss" with the TAs but only asked them help in implementing her ideas and decisions.

Marking student works was another part of my teaching duty. This was a bit challenging since CUHK's grading system is unlike the grading system in Sweden, and also unlike the grading system used in International Courses in Europe (more on this later in the comparison part).

### **Activities in the semester**

I started the semester by sitting in some of the classes held by my co-teacher, and later I also attended some lectures given by another teacher in one of my course and in the Urban Design course. This provides me with an insight of the different approaches the lectures by the teachers and how students responded to different issues and perspectives. For the classes that I co-teach this was also for me to be introduced to the students early on in the course, as well to get some first ideas about student ways of learning.

Apart from my teaching work mentioned above, I was very much involved in the Master Course of Urban Design, held at the School of Architecture at CUHK. As mentioned earlier, the School of Architecture was the co-organiser of the Urban Studies programme. Moreover, the head of the course Master of Urban Design was my second contact person at CUHK. I gave one lecture in the course and sat at most (all except one) review sessions and was able to follow the students' works from the inventory stages to the final examination. I also met with several other teachers at the School of Architecture as well as invited consults from an architect office in Hong Kong. This provided me with a good insight into how the course was built, the perspectives, the pedagogy used, as well as the academic and professional profile of the course and the master programme.

In the framework of the Urban Design master course, I went with the students to all the field trips and learned a lot about urban renewal plan and issues in Hong Kong. This had been very useful for my lectures and provided me with very interesting materials for future research.

In December 2017, the School of Architecture at CUHK organized a 3 days conference, the 10<sup>th</sup> conference of the International Forum on Urbanism (IFOU) on the topic: The Entrepreneurial city, addressing the question of how to create urban prosperity and an inclusive economy from a urban design perspective. The IFOU is a network of universities, research institutes and knowledge centres that collaborate in the field of urbanism. I was invited to be a speaker at the Forum as well as act as the moderator in a parallel session. The conference has been an inspiring experience; there were many papers that dealt with urban issues that I address in my research. The conference provided a great platform to meet other scholars at the School of Architecture, as well as scholars from various countries in Asia and Europe.



A part from the activities at CUHK, I gave a talk in a research seminar at Hong Kong University. This was also an opportunity for me to meet other scholars in the field of urban planning and design outside Chinese University. I was given a guided tour to the Department of Architecture and Urban Planning at Hong Kong University and got a glimpse of the facilities, the subjects and scope of the teaching activities there.

### **Effective administration**

I was very impressed by the efficient administration of my (short-term) employment at CUHK. The OAL, the Personnel Office and the administration staff at the Department of Geography and Natural resources have been very effective in handling the visa and I was provided with an office, computer, and got my staff card and internet ID during the first two days at CUHK.

## **The academic and social environment**

While I have a good relation and a fruitful collaboration with my co-teacher, I hardly had any contact with the other teachers at the Department. My co-teacher, who is also the Deputy Head of the Department, was supposed to arrange a get-together with the other teachers at the Department but she was too busy with her many commitments and I was not officially introduced to the Department during the whole semester. Since there is no coffee pause in CUHK and people seem to stay in their offices, there was no natural context for me to meet the other staffs, though I did by chance run into other teachers at the corridor. Although I got a CUHK mail address I did not get any information of research seminars that were organised at the Department. (I found out later that the email did not work).

In the end, at a staff outing in early November, I had a chance to meet the most of the staffs at the Department. It was good to see the diversity in disciplines as well as age groups among the staffs I met. Students and alumni also took part of the outing and it was very nice to observe the open interactions between the students and the teachers outside the classroom. In this outing I also meet the teacher who was responsible for organising research seminars at the department. It was pity that we met so late, the seminar dates was already filled up.

I wished I was officially introduced to the Department from the start. This kind of general introduction could be very efficiently organised by the administration, together with the provision of an office, computer ID and Staff card. It was not a good idea to rely only on the academic contact, who was already burdened with the responsibility to slot me into the teaching system, to also be charged with the task of introducing me to the other staffs at the Department.

## **Comparisons and reflections**

### **“Whole person education”**

CUHK's education system provides breadth, in difference to the more specialization approach in Sweden. All CUHK faculties are linked to one of its 9 colleges and this allows close contacts and interactions between teachers, students and alumni. The colleges provide, besides education, housing restaurants, orientation for new students and community life. This is considered to contribute to what is stated as “whole person education and pastoral care” (CUHK website).

The undergraduate program's curriculum shows a breadth in education with various combinations of foundation courses, specialization courses, and elective courses. The



foundation courses (called the University Core) aim to develop general competences in and through language study (Chinese, English) General Education, Information Technology and Physical Education. The specialization courses (belong to the Major programme), provide depth and where applicable, professional training. The Capstone course (the final year project) requires the synthesis of subject knowledge as well as independent enquiry (research or design, fieldwork or internship). Undergraduate program at CUHK is four years with the first year intended to help students in their transition from school to university, from pupil to independent learner (CUHK website).

The above is a clear difference to the majority of undergraduate programs in Sweden, which typically are of 3 years, and offer education within specialized fields.

Study visits to foreign universities/sites are common feature of many courses. This is intended to reflect the course's regional/global outlook and relevance. CUHK teachers say that students appreciate the opportunities to have study visit abroad and courses with this feature are considered more attractive.

In my program in Malmö, study visit abroad are provided in only one course. In this case, as well as in Hong Kong, the students have to cover for the travel and accommodation during the visiting period themselves. While the study visits are very much appreciated by the majority of our students, we have got critique from some students on what they considered as an “undemocratic approach” as they cater for the better-off students. I think this reflects the different approaches to higher education in the two countries: the more competitive approach in Hong Kong and the morality that “that every should have the right to higher education” in Sweden.

### **Disciplined students**

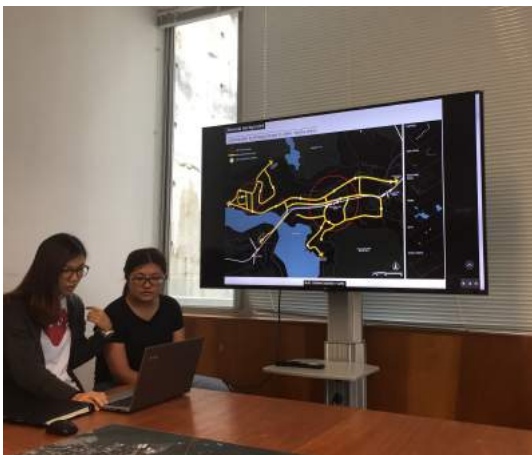
The students in my classes at CUHK seem to be of a homogenous age group and they are on the whole younger than my students in Malmö. In one of my classes there are a sizable group of foreign students from other Asian countries such as South East Asia, Taiwan, as well as from other Western countries such as The Netherland, Sweden, and America. A high majority of students, especially Hong Kong students and students from main land China, are very ambitious and diligent in their studies and they really try hard to have good grades.

In different to the courses provided in Sweden that tend to run in sequences, all the courses at CUHK run parallel through the whole semester, so students have to work with many subjects at the same time. Many students study double major and follow even more courses. This

requires greater discipline and also a source of stress for students, especially at the end of the semester. It has been discussed that students in Hong Kong face great pressure to have good study results, both from their students and from the high competitive environment. There was quite a few discussions in the media that highlight the problem with stress and the high rate of suicide among students in Hong Kong.

The serial organisation of courses in Malmö means that the student group study one subject at a time. However, many Swedish students have job besides their studies, and this means another kind of stress.

The courses at CUHK are rather demanding. A 3-unit credit course (corresponding to 6 hp) has a similar workload to our 10hp courses in Sweden. It consists of 9 or 10 lectures, fieldtrip, group project, literature seminar and includes at several examinations: individual essay, group work, take home examination, a written fieldwork reflection as well as a course reflection which is also graded. This requires a lot of works both from the students as well as of the teachers.



The high study moral of students Hong Kong may also be attributed to the facts that students (their families) pay for their education and they have to retake the course if they fail. This is different to the education system in Sweden in which students are entitled to three re-examinations in an academic year and up to five re-examinations during the whole program. This provides students with more freedom but also lead to a more relaxed attitude to examinations and eventually mean more works for teachers.

## Examinations and grades

CUHK has a relative-grading approach, to achieve a distribution of grades along the scale.

For examples the number of (full) A grades are not to be more than 10%, and A and B grades together should not be less than 50 % and A, B and C together should not be more than 90 %. This means that when we finished the grading, if the total of those with grades C and above is 93 % we need to review the grades and downgrade some to fit in with the requirements.

I found it difficult to conform to the idea of controlling the results to have a certain distribution of grades very strange. I like to think that it is the examination criteria that should guide the marking, and it is not up to any of us to decide in advance how the outcomes should look like. However, I understand that this is a measure to assess individual student's result in relation to others in the class, as well as to prevent grade inflation.

Despite the courses being quite demanding, the overall results were very good. The 90% requirements of passing grades was probably based on previous courses, since the students did very well and more than 90% of them were graded the passing grades even before I checked the requirements regarding grade distribution. This is a higher achievement level compare to the results of many courses I have teach in Malmö in which the total number of passing grades after the first examination could vary between 60% to 80% and certainly less than 90 %. Understandably, Swedish students may not feel the pressure to have passing grade on the first examination, since they have several chances to retake the exams and the majority would get a passing grade at the second try. But this certainly means more works for the teachers.

## Teaching methods/pedagogy

In the courses I have observed, the teaching methods were quite “conventional”. The teachers gave lectures and the students listened and took notes copiously.

As mentioned earlier, we decided to run the literature seminar the way I do in Malmö, having discussions on the literature in small groups. This seems to be new for the students, who considered it is a good way for them to learn from their peers as well as to have access to clarification and discussion lead by the teacher. My co-teacher said that this was a very good way to get students to go deeper into the reading materials and she would use this form again next year, with some small modifications. I have the feeling is that we use the seminar for slightly different purpose. My impression is that she considers it a good way to examine students' reading and understanding. From my perspective, the seminar serves to assist

students with the reading. While this also include controlling whether students read and understand, the purpose is not for examination but to assist them in their reading and discussion.

While my co-teacher and I are equally familiar with the topics we are teaching, and we have similar perspectives on most issues, the ways we present the topic/issue to the students are somewhat different. Hers is more of a hand-down way: “this is the way things are” while my (probably more Swedish) way is more of an introduction of a problem/phenomenon for the class to explore and discuss. She tends to provide clear, assertive answer, while I consider it more important to raise question and to highlight the complexity of the issue. The time has been too short to evaluate if my way of approaching the topic was confusing for the students or it has contributed to a certain level of independent thinking, or both.

I was very inspired by the visit to Nanyang Technical University (NTU) in Singapore and to learn about Team Based Learning (TBL) and the flipped classroom. In difference to ‘normal’ group work, TBL process takes place both before and in the classroom. Students come to the classroom well prepared (by watching/reading the lecture prepared beforehand by the teachers) and there are possibilities for the teacher (with the use of advanced technology) to test students’ knowledge, both before the team work as well as in the final presentation of the team work. In this process, the teacher provides the structure for learning but a greater responsibility for the learning process is placed on the students.

The classrooms and university environment at NTU are very well equipped and there is an extensive use of advanced digital technologies to monitor students learning process in the classroom from the beginning to the end. There is also impressive supporting unit with professionals in filming and visualisation and IT technicians who assist the teacher in producing teaching materials.

This has been a very inspiring experience and I would very much apply this in my program at Malmö. However it may be difficult for lecturers at Swedish university to find time to find ways to produce good quality digital teaching materials without those technical supports.

### **Strong alumni involvement**

CUHK keeps good contacts with its alumni. CUHK have many alumni associations in the world. Alumni are eligible to use many of CUHK academic facilities and services. There is an alumni newsletter and many activities organised by alumni. Many of them act as student mentors and help to gather funding for many university activities.

Students and alumni are included in the department staff outing. I believe that this is part of CUHK's approach to create a life-long learning community.

### **Action plan**

The semester has been a great learning experience for me and there are many things I would like to put into actions when returning to my work at Urban Studies in Malmö:

#### **Development and application of new pedagogic methods**

One of my plans is to explore the possibilities to use TBL in my program in Malmö. While the group work in my program already made use of the problem solving pedagogy, the strength of TBL is to trigger independent learning and the test included in this process is important. Some of the challenges would be to formulate this pre-class test and to monitor students' learning process without the help of IT technologies. Another challenge would be to determine a suitable group size in order to have a good teamwork while not straining the budget by having too many tutors.

#### **Encouraging study exchange**

Currently Malmö University has exchange agreements with many universities in Europe, America, Australia as well as Asia, among these CUHK. In these exchange programmes, our students study at the foreign university one semester and foreign students study at Malmö University one semester. Few students have gone to CUHK. My semester at CUHK have given me good ideas as to which programmes and which courses are suitable for my students. My own experience also makes me more convinced of the benefits of a study exchange. I will be more active promoting study exchange for students in my programs and also for other programs in Malmö. One of my Malmö students was encouraged to apply to study one semester at the Urban Studies Programme at CUHK and she has just started her semester there now in January 2018.

#### **Master program in Urban Design and Planning**

Before leaving for Hong Kong, initial discussions have taken place at Urban Studies in Malmö on the establishment of a Master Program in Sustainable Urbanism, providing advanced education in urban design and planning, both for our bachelor students as well as to attract international students. My involvement in the Master Programme at CUHK strengthens my resolution to work further with development for the master program and provides me with ideas regarding topics and forms of examinations to be included in the curriculum,

contemporary urban issues in the global context, as well as interesting case studies. It also convinces me of the theoretical strength of our bachelor education in Malmö, something we could further cultivate in our future master programme.

### **Acknowledgement**

I am indebted to many persons for a very rewarding semester at CUHK and in Hong Kong: My warmest thanks are due to Mee Kam Ng., at the GRM, and Hendrik Tieben at the School of Architecture, for being my valuable academic partners at CUHK. I thank Olivia Kwok at the AOL for her kind support in the initial planning phase, and Grace Tang for good company both at CUHK and outside. Special thanks are to my long-term friends Terry Leung and Ngai-Ming Yip who have provided me with guidance and unfailing support in all matters from practical to academic during the whole semester. The solid back up from my own department, Urban Studies in Malmö, especially from Sandra Jönsson and Jonas Alwall, are gratefully acknowledged.

Most of all, I own this valuable learning experience to STINT, who had made it possible. A warm thank to Mr. Christofer Carlsson, who has provided us with steady supports at all steps along the process.