

Book Review:

“Building Catholic Churches in Hong Kong: Stories of the laity and living faith” by Ayako Fukushima

Author: Ayako Fukushima (2022)

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Ayako Fukushima’s “Building Catholic Churches in Hong Kong” (Figure 1) is a comprehensive examination of the architectural evolution of Catholic churches in Hong Kong from a grassroots perspective. This scholarly work spans numerous years, meticulously documenting the transformations in church architecture not just through the lens of structural and aesthetic features, but also by considering the roles played by laypeople and devotees. Unlike traditional architectural studies that often focus solely on tangible aspects, Fukushima’s analysis is unique in its emphasis on the interplay between social dynamics and architectural form. The book’s analysis employs a laity-centric and devotee-centric approach, highlighting how the involvement of non-clergy church members has influenced the design and function of church buildings. This focus diverges from conventional architectural documents that predominantly analyze the physical attributes of structures. The roles of the laity and clergy in church construction, spanning various historical periods from 1841 to 2019, also are analyzed in detail. The book examines how church buildings evolved from simple mission stations to complex



Figure 1. “Building Catholic Churches in Hong Kong” by Ayako Fukushima

structures integrated with schools and other community facilities. Fukushima's work underscores the importance of understanding the social structure of Catholic churches in Hong Kong which has profoundly impacted the tangible aspects of church creation. This perspective illuminates the ways in which the hierarchical organization within the Catholic Church has shaped, and been shaped by, the physical spaces of worship.

Readers with a background in architecture may find themselves better equipped to appreciate the nuances of Fukushima's exploration. Without such a background, the rich detail regarding the architectural ensemble of churches in Hong Kong might come across as a simple narrative of laypeople's experiences. However, Fukushima's documentation of these architectural details adds a valuable dimension to understanding the architectural history of Hong Kong's Catholic churches. Fukushima presents a compelling argument that the people's movement in Hong Kong has manifested itself in the evolution of church architecture. The mid-20th century saw an important shift in the role of the laity, moving from a subordinate position within the religious hierarchy to a more empowered and secularized role. This change was not confined to Hong Kong but reflected a global trend within the Catholic Church. This shift dramatically altered the dynamics within religious communities, impacting not only social interactions but also the architectural landscape of Catholic churches.

A chronological account of the social and political circumstances from the early 19th century to 2020 has been provided, contextualizing the architectural evolution of Catholic churches within broader historical events. Fukushima thoroughly documents the existence and development of 358 churches in Hong Kong, tracing their origins from the colonial era to the contemporary period, including the significant Umbrella Movement. Fukushima's investigation into the typology of churches in Hong Kong reveals a contextualized approach rather than a strict categorization based on architectural style or structure. The utilization of church buildings, both for secular and religious purposes, defines their form and planning. This functional approach highlights the deep connection between church spaces and the socio-political and economic circumstances of their time. Churches evolved from standalone structures designed by Western architects to mixed-use buildings serving various community needs. This evolution underscores the adaptability of church architecture to meet the changing demands of society.

Initially, churches in Hong Kong played a crucial role in education and welfare services, functioning as extensions of government policy, while clergy members often took on roles such as project managers, fund-raisers, site supervisors, and designers. In the early stages of church development in Hong Kong, spanning the 19th and early 20th centuries, two predominant types of churches emerged: "mission stations" and "stand-alone churches." These typologies marked the initial phases of Catholic presence in the region and played crucial roles in religious outreach and community development. Mission stations, characterized as temporary facilities, served as hubs for religious activities but lacked formal blessings or consecrations. Typically located in rural areas, missionaries tasked with evangelization visited these stations regularly, staying for extended periods to spread their faith and administer sacraments. In contrast, stand-alone churches emerged as permanent structures dedicated solely to religious services. These churches were formally blessed or consecrated and housed resident priests, establishing them as central hubs of Catholic worship within their respective communities. Throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, stand-alone churches served as focal points for religious gatherings, spiritual guidance, and community cohesion. However, despite their prominence, the construction of stand-alone churches dwindled in the post-World War II period, with only a few new churches being built due to changing demographic patterns.

Post-World War II, Hong Kong experienced rapid urbanization, prompting the colonial government to prioritize the construction of schools alongside churches. This era witnessed churches adapting to urban constraints by developing multi-utilization buildings accommodating both religious and secular activities. The need for dual-use spaces became evident, with classrooms often sharing buildings with chapels, albeit with varying economic efficiency under government subsidy systems, leading to a decline in the prevalence of traditional “stand-alone churches” and “mission stations”. Concurrently, between 1945 and 1955, the Catholic Church landscape in Hong Kong underwent transformation. The post-war period presented unique challenges, necessitating the adaptation of traditional church models to meet the evolving needs of the growing population. Consequently, innovative approaches to church design and construction emerged, reflecting the Church’s commitment to providing inclusive and accessible spaces for worship and community engagement amidst demographic shifts. Thus, this new type of church structure, the “church and school complex,” appeared. These complexes were school buildings that included permanent parish church spaces, designed to meet the needs of a rapidly growing young population. The church and school complexes usually were constructed with reinforced concrete and have four to six stories. These buildings feature a uniform rectangular design for the church space. A notable example is St. Francis of Assisi Church, constructed in 1955, which shares a site and building with St. Francis of Assisi School (Figure 2). The church is located on the first floor, along with the priests’ quarters and classrooms.

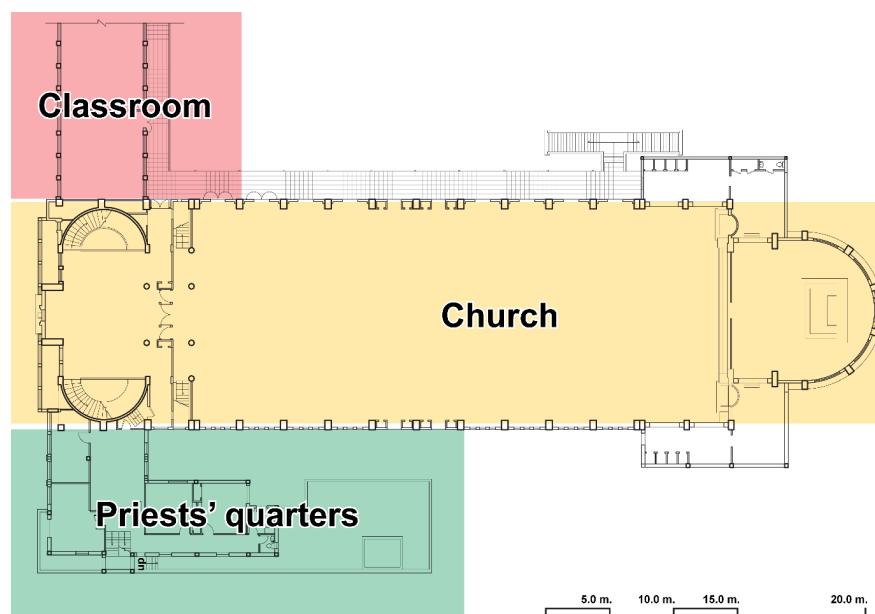


Figure 2. First floor plan of St. Francis of Assisi Church, constructed in 1955 (adapted from Fukushima, 2019).

The involvement of local architects, including members of the laity, began to increase from the 1960s with the establishment of the Hong Kong Architecture School. Despite this involvement, decision-making power largely remained with the clergy. However, the gradual shift in power from clergy to laity became evident over time, reflecting broader societal changes. This shift impacted the utilization of church spaces, leading to the removal of permanent interior elements deemed unnecessary and eventually transforming the overall perception of churches within society.

A transition period occurred between 1983 and 1995, during which the Liturgical Art and Architecture Commission (LAAC) operated informally before being replaced by the Diocesan Building and Development Commission (DBDC). This period was pivotal, introducing professional lay members into the church-building process and leveraging their expertise in the construction industry (Figure 3). The years leading up to the handover of Hong Kong to China saw the development of small faith communities, which served as platforms for underground churches during times of religious repression. These communities, led by lay members, played a crucial role in sustaining faith in the absence of public churches and clergy. The impact of religious repression on church construction and renovation before the handover period was substantial. In response, the diocese not only witnessed an increase in the construction and renovation of churches during this period but also took proactive steps to empower the laity through theological education. This approach was recognized as a crucial measure to prepare for an uncertain future.

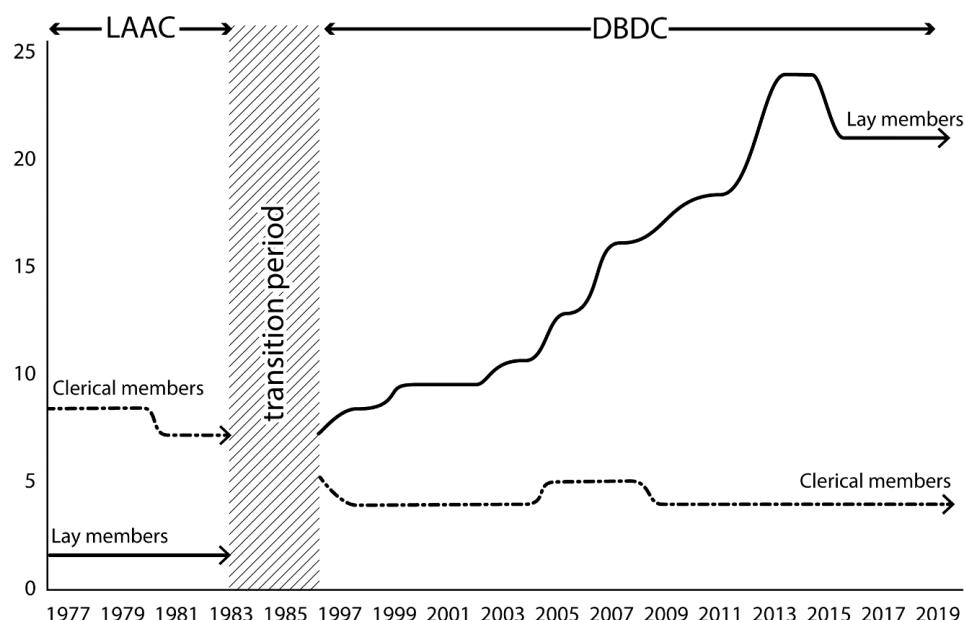


Figure 3. Number of lay and clerical members of Liturgical Art and Architecture Commission (LAAC) and Diocesan Building and Development Commission (DBDC) (adapted from Fukushima, 2022, p. 111).

To the late 2010s, there was an intricate interplay between church construction, lay participation, and societal transformations in Hong Kong. This era witnessed important historical contexts, including anxieties over Hong Kong's return to China, heightened crisis awareness following the Tiananmen Square Incident, and evolving political landscapes. The response from the Catholic Church was multifaceted, encompassing the promotion of lay apostolate, the establishment of community-oriented organizations, and the adaptation of church management strategies. These initiatives coincided with profound shifts in Hong Kong society, marked by a growing local identity, economic transitions towards a tertiary sector-driven economy, and a surge in expertise among lay construction professionals. Amidst these changes, church construction types evolved, reflecting shifting urban landscapes and societal needs. From school-attached churches to urban redevelopment types, each represented a response to changing community dynamics and infrastructure demands. Lay participation emerged as a central theme, manifesting in various forms, including architectural consultancy, technical supervision, and theological training for lay architects.

Up to 2018, the Catholic Church in Hong Kong navigated a complex landscape marked by several factors. Various socio-political dynamics, mainland China's religious policies, and Hong Kong's burgeoning democratization movement converged. Against this backdrop, the Catholic Church in Hong Kong grappled with its own internal struggles, particularly concerning its relationship with the government and the exacerbating issues of land availability and housing. During this period, the variety of church types in Hong Kong mirrored the changing needs of the Catholic community. From facilities functioning as community halls to those designated as school Mass centers, each type catered to specific requirements of the faithful. Moreover, there was a noticeable revival in the creation of school Mass centers, indicating a reversion to traditional modes of worship and community involvement within educational settings.

However, despite the imperative to construct and maintain church infrastructure, various hindrances emerged during this period. These obstacles ranged from bureaucratic red tape to challenges associated with land scarcity and escalating property prices. Such impediments posed challenges to the Catholic community's efforts to expand and maintain its physical presence in Hong Kong. Amidst these challenges, the Catholic Construction Expert Advisory Group (CaBPAG) emerged as a pivotal entity advocating for the integration of lay spirituality into church maintenance endeavors. As a maintenance organization, CaBPAG played a crucial role in providing guidance and support for church renovation and upkeep initiatives. Moreover, CaBPAG's efforts were imbued with a deep sense of spirituality, reflecting a holistic approach to church maintenance that transcended mere physical renovations. The integration of CaBPAG's activities with broader lay spiritual movements underscored the intrinsic connection between faith and the practical aspects of maintaining sacred spaces.

Over the past 200 years, changes in the social structure of Hong Kong have profoundly affected the physical construction of Catholic churches, reflecting broader socio-political and economic dynamics. The unique interdependency between the government and the church during colonial times, along with the consequential shifts after the decision on Hong Kong's return, has greatly influenced the evolution of church dynamics. In response to the need for church space, both clergy and laypeople have been actively involved, with the latter playing increasingly important roles. Notably, laypeople, including architects and engineers, became pivotal contributors to these initiatives. Initially serving as assistants to priests, their involvement deepened with the emergence of global spiritual movements and the socio-political upheavals surrounding Hong Kong's return to Chinese sovereignty. Over time, their engagement expanded beyond practical assistance to encompass spiritual exploration through church maintenance and renovation projects.

The design of spaces, shapes, and architectural elements in Catholic churches in Hong Kong has evolved to meet the changing needs of the community while reflecting broader socio-political and cultural contexts. Initially, church architecture focused on functional simplicity, with mission stations serving as temporary hubs for religious activities and stand-alone churches offering more permanent, formal structures dedicated solely to worship. As Hong Kong urbanized post-World War II, the need for multi-utilization buildings arose, leading to the creation of church-school complexes. These buildings, constructed with reinforced concrete and featuring uniform rectangular designs, combined religious and educational functions within a single structure, maximizing space and addressing the growing urban population's needs.

In the latter half of the 20th century and into the 21st century, there was a shift towards greater involvement of laypeople in church design and construction. This period saw the adaptation of church interiors to accommodate multiple community functions, with a focus on flexibility and the removal of unnecessary permanent elements. Modern church architecture in Hong Kong often blends traditional design with contemporary innovations,

reflecting the church's response to urban redevelopment and socio-political changes. The incorporation of professional lay expertise in architectural consultancy and technical supervision has further influenced the design of church spaces, ensuring they remain relevant and functional amidst ongoing challenges such as land scarcity and rising property prices. Figures 4-7 showing some examples of existing church types.

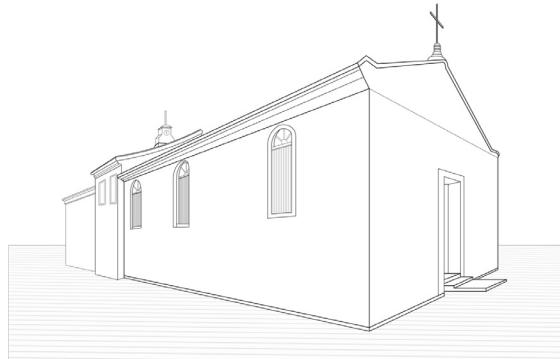


Figure 4. Holy Family Chapel in Chek Keng (1867), the oldest mission station in the rural area of Chek Keng. The structure still exists but is closed.



Figure 5. Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception (1888), a standalone church.

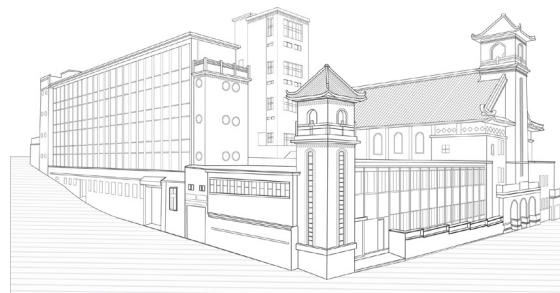


Figure 6. St. Francis of Assisi Church and St. Francis of Assisi's English Primary School (1955), an example of a church/school complex.

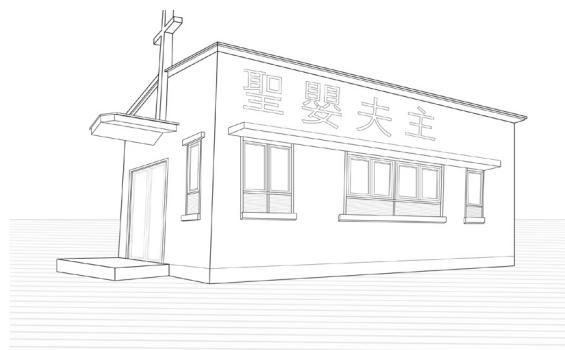


Figure 7. Infant Jesus of Prague Retreat Centre (1982), an example of a church and kindergarten complex.

The book also raises questions about the complexity of church typologies, as it identifies 12 distinct types of churches that often overlap in classification. This complexity can make it difficult for readers to follow, as the typologies sometimes are based on usage, sometimes on architectural form, and at other times on the developer of the building. This multifaceted approach can lead to confusion and a lack of clarity in understanding the categorization of the churches. To address this issue, it would be beneficial to reduce or hierarchize the typology into main types and sub-types. By eliminating less important data dimensions and focusing on the most critical aspects, the classification and clustering of church types could be more accurate and easier to understand. This streamlined approach not only would reduce computational costs but also enhance the readability and coherence of the analysis. Despite these challenges, the book's discussion on the culture of the laity and the conservation of historic churches provides valuable insights into the unique context of Hong Kong.

Kong. The emphasis on maintaining and renewing religious structures reflects broader Asian cultural attitudes towards sacred spaces, where both laypeople and clergy are deeply committed to the upkeep of temples and religious buildings. This cultural perspective underscores the communal effort and spiritual dedication involved in the preservation of sacred architecture, highlighting the intertwined relationship between social dynamics and religious spaces in Hong Kong.

In conclusion, Ayako Fukushima's "Building Catholic Churches in Hong Kong" offers a detailed and nuanced exploration of the interplay between social dynamics and architectural development. The book's focus on the laity's role in church construction and its comprehensive historical analysis provide a rich context for understanding the architectural evolution of Catholic churches in Hong Kong. This work stands out for its unique approach, emphasizing the social and political factors that have shaped church architecture over the past two centuries. Through meticulous documentation and thoughtful analysis, the book offers valuable insights into the complex relationship between society and sacred spaces, thereby making it an important contribution to architectural history and religious studies. Furthermore, this book fulfills a gap that has been consistently overlooked in architectural studies, offering a new way to see and understand space and its features through people's perception.

Author Contributions

The author, P.Y., confirms sole responsibility for the following: conceptualization, methodology, validation, formal analysis, investigation, resources, data curation, writing - original draft, writing - review & editing, visualization, supervision, project administration, and funding acquisition.

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