

ABSTRACT

MA, MAGDY. A Semiotic Phenomenology of Visual Rhetoric: Communication and Perception of Attributes of Cultural Sustainability in the Visual Environment of Public Housing. (Under the direction of Prof. Meredith Davis.)

The challenge of communicating ideas of cultural sustainability by visual means is recognized in the design community but rarely studied, in part for the lack of theoretical and methodological strategies to cope with the complexities of visual-human interaction. In this dissertation, an integrated theoretical model of visual communication, referred to as the RSP framework, comprising rhetoric, semiotics, and phenomenology, is constructed. Its assumptions provide theoretical foundations for an inquiry into residents' experiences engaging in the visual phenomenon of "new signage" and "estate art" in Hong Kong public housing estates. The focus of study concerns how and to what extent the design, meanings, and experiences of the phenomenon evoke a sense of cultural sustainability in residents.

A mixed-method "concurrent nested qual+QUAL" research strategy was developed to approach the research problem. The theory-driven methodology embeds semiotics within the dominant strategy of phenomenology. I began with a reflective process of "bracketing," providing a descriptive account of the researcher's experience of the phenomenon. Qualitative interviews were conducted in four estates with 26 participant residents including elderly people, workers, housewives, and students. Standardized open-ended questions elicited participants' readings of designs within the social context. They were "nested" within in-depth conversational questions which generated participants' full descriptions, first-person accounts of visual experiences as interpreted within amore private individual context.

Bracketing identified that a rhetorical situation exists in the semiotic neighborhoods of study estates wherein relocated, resettled residents appear to have "a sense of disorientation" as well as "aspiration to prosper." These sensibilities are addressed through the provision of residential name signs and public art. The nine vignettes extracted from the

data are reconstructed descriptions of specific participants' profiles and their unique visual experiences. The socio-semiotic analysis of the design of visual objects entailed seven cultural codes of visuals, including, for example, "innovative hi-tech" and "poetic nostalgia." The codes represent cultural values underpinning the community. Phenomenological reduction of residents' descriptive data resulted in seven phenomenological themes, such as "envisioning progress and prosperity" and "encouraging cultural learning." Together the themes constitute a structure of shared experience, indicating the perceived attributes of cultural sustainability. Further, reflections on the data uncovered five interpretive positions underlying participants' experiences, such as "preparation" and "appreciation." Themes and experiential conditions are the essences of experience without which the perception of cultural sustainability could not have emerged.

A synthesis of findings suggests that the phenomenon is a visual rhetoric seeking the persuasion of values significant to residents through encoded meanings transmitted through design. The communication and perception of attributes that contribute to cultural sustainability of residential community involved residents decoding the meanings of visuals, which evoke thoughts and feelings about the vitality of the community and continuity of Chinese culture. Perceiving cultural sustainability requires residents' thinking, remembering and judging the meanings of one's experience to the self. It is a result of "visuality" – interrelationships among the persuasive power of design messages, signification of visual objects, and viewing experience of people – conditioned by the interpretive positions taken by residents within their social context. The inquiry shows that the communication process can be understood through approaches of rhetoric, semiotics, and phenomenology.

As a result, this dissertation bridges the fields of visual communication and sustainability. It unveils their enhanced social values when these fields are integrated, strengthens their knowledge base especially by its theoretical and methodological implications; and in particular, it pushes forward the new field of study referred to as cultural sustainability.

A Semiotic Phenomenology of Visual Rhetoric: Communication and Perception of
Attributes of Cultural Sustainability in the Visual Environment of Public Housing

by
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To Mexci, Melody, and Olivia

Biography

Magdy Ma was born in 1956 in Shantou, China and grew up in Hong Kong. She studied graphic design at the Hong Kong Polytechnic and the California State University in Los Angeles. Graduated with Distinction from the Polytechnic, she joined Design Development, one of Hong Kong's leading design consultancies in the 80s. She became specialized in corporate identity design for hotels and restaurants; her projects concentrated on designing for properties owned by the Peninsula Group in Hong Kong and in the Far East.

After years of practicing as a commercial-based designer, Magdy entered the public sector working as information officer (design) with the Hong Kong government. She was promoted to senior information officer in 1991, and chosen for overseas training at the California State University in 1992. From design production to design management, her career in the Government Information Services spanned two decades. She had served the central government as well as many government departments. For example, at the Hong Kong Housing Authority she designed and organized exhibitions to publicize the Home Ownership Scheme, at Urban Council she focused on promotional design for cultural events such as the Arts Festivals, and at the Medical and Health Department she produced public health educational materials.

Magdy also provided creative support for promoting the image of Hong Kong abroad. She was involved in the "Brand Hong Kong" program through visual design in multiple media to market Hong Kong as Asia's World City internationally. In 2003, she led

her team of photographers and designers in developing series of public information products in quick response to the outbreak of SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Symptom) in China and Hong Kong. Over the years, she had art-directed public service advertising projects, formulated storylines for TV APIs (Announcements in the Public Interest), created graphic communications for campaigns on social issues such as fight crime, anti-narcotics, AIDS prevention, and road safety.

The public-oriented nature of work rooted Magdy's deep concern about the need for visual communication design to achieve positive human-visual relation. To enhance design thinking, she took study leave from the civil service, which also funded her study, and received a Master of Arts in Design from the Hong Kong Polytechnic University in 1997. Supported by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council, in 1999 she published *Disoriented Visual Objects: Their Creators and Users*, in which she advocates a "habitable visual language" in a "fragmented visual world." Realizing her interest as understanding the conceptual foundations for design and researching into their socio-cultural implications, she retired in late 2003 and continued to work toward a PhD in Design at the North Carolina State University.

Magdy has been a research assistant to her advisor Prof. Meredith Davis in 2004 and 2005. She is a member of the Chartered Society of Designers (CSD, UK) and the National Communication Association (NCA, USA). She has presented paper, at the conference of Environmental Design Research Association (EDRA 36), on visual diversity and cultural vitality; and at the 91st National Communication Association Annual Convention, she proposed a theory of visual wellbeing.

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This work, as well as my pursuit of doctoral education, also has a history of people who were influential in its inception and direction. Dr. Hazel Clark and Prof. Clive Dilnot first introduced me to the landscape of philosophical and cultural authorship; much of which have informed this work. Dr. Perver Baran furnished a bewildered student with fundamental knowledge of research paradigms and methods. Colleagues in the Information Services Department HKSAR, including Brett Free, Bob Howlett, and Dora Chu, believed in my ability and decision to undertake academic challenge beyond professional commitment. For all these initial backgrounds I am appreciative.

The practical research of this dissertation was carried out with some forty Hong

Kong public housing residents; this dissertation documents their voices and stories. Their enthusiasm about being interviewed and their trust in me was essential to the success of my fieldwork, as was the assistance given by the Hong Kong Housing Authority, Art Promotion Office, the Leisure and Cultural Services Department. Grateful acknowledgement is made to these bodies for providing useful information and materials necessary for the research.

I extend my thanks to friends, relatives, and fellow students for their heartening support in ways of their own. Respectable elders Peter and Heiling began the long, unflinching help the first night I landed in RDU. For many years they backed me with words of wisdom, prayers, homemade dinners; the warm hospitality made me feel at home in Raleigh. Wonderful friends Grace and Dorina showed care into my emotion and health; their laughter over the phone cheered me up; their ample supply of ginseng tea kept me in sober sense through numerous nights of dissertation writing. At one point, brother-in-law Roger fixed my air ticket, “forced” me out of my apartment to take a break from my exhausting data analysis by vacationing on the ocean with the family. Graduate students Rosan, Claudia, Sudeshna, and Hyejung demonstrated for me courage and intelligence, shared with me happy hours at different periods of my life as a PhD student.

Finally, it should be noted that this dissertation would never have been accomplished without the understanding, love, and patience of my husband Mexci, my dear daughters Melody and Olivia, who allowed for their mother’s navigation of a doctoral journey at a time they needed me too. My deepest love and thanks go to them.

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Preface

Sustainability is a way of living, soon to be the only way of living if we are to survive on this planet.

(Hsin 2004)

Sustainability is not a technical problem to be solved . . . but a vision of the future that focuses our attention on a set of values and ethical principles by which to guide our actions . . .

(Viederman 1995)

What relevance do these intriguing insights hold for communication design? What possibly can designers do within their work to reflect conviction about the cultural imperative of sustainability?

I affirm, based on my agreement with the first statement, that everyone, as an individual and as a professional, must face up to the problem of sustainability. Responding to the second statement, I determine that sustainability as a cultural issue is pressing at this time, and I aspire to search into its cultural dimensions from the perspective of a “researching professional” in the discipline of visual communication.

This dissertation is the product of a designer’s critical reflection and research into ethical values embodied in the design of visual objects. It offers a possibility of a research agenda – “sustainability communication” – for design research. This work is meant for

readers who are my fellow designers, but also for those who look beyond the larger role design plays in society.

I see my work as having theoretical ambitions, on one hand, and empirical outcomes, on the other. Thus, the main title of this work is “A semiotic phenomenology of visual rhetoric,” indicating the application of a phenomenological view of human experience coupled with a semiotic analysis of visual meaning while incorporating the rhetorical view of visual design. The subtitle introduces the dissertation’s empirical intent: investigating the “Communication and perception of attributes of cultural sustainability in the visual environment of public housing.” The work addresses a particular visual/cultural phenomenon and its situated communicative impact on human perception in the context of Hong Kong public housing.

1

Overview

The underpinning of this dissertation is the concept of “sustainability communication.”¹ As a term, it has recently gained currency in design and social discourse, and yet, as a practice, the communication of ideas about sustainability been a longstanding need in all regions of the world. In 1992, at the Rio Earth Summit,² more than 178 governments signed the global action plan for sustainable development, *Agenda 21*.³ Implementation of the plan requires communication⁴ at all levels, among governments, and to the public. The need was identified, for example in 2002, the World Summit on Sustainable Development⁵ plan of implementation proposed to edify the public through advertising and other types of communication in order to foster a culture of sustainability. In

¹ “Sustainability communication” emerged as a term in sustainability discourse in 2006 as the announcement was made on the production of the *Handbook of Sustainability Communication* to address the need to communicate sustainability ideas to various target groups and audiences. (See <http://www.projekte.org>) Prior to that, the UNEP had presented “The Creative Gallery on Sustainability Communications” in 2005 on the internet as the first international online database of corporate and public advertising campaigns specifically dedicated to sustainability issues. (See <http://www.unep.fr/scp/communications>) The term as used in this dissertation refers primarily to the visual modes of communicating ideas of sustainability.

² *The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development*, Rio de Janeiro, 3-14 June 1992. See also <http://www.un.org/esa/earthsummit>.

³ See <http://www.un.org/esa/susdev/documents/agenda21>

⁴ Communication is broadly taken here as the process, the product or result of the sharing of information.

⁵ See <http://www.un.org/jsummit>

2005, the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP), partnered in the *Act Responsible Exhibition: Great Ads for a Better Future*, showing over 300 communication campaigns that originated from 32 countries.⁶

Increasingly, government agencies, academic communities, and communication authorities respond to the challenge of communicating sustainability issues, demonstrating that it is “no longer a niche activity but a mainstream one” (UNEP & Futerra 2005) in all societies. Communication related to sustainability, however, is currently understood and practiced in a narrow sense. Two major foci are currently observed: a focus on communicating issues specific to the environmental impact of print media and printing products; and a focus on communicating about topics such as energy saving, air pollution, or sustainable consumption –the so-called “green advertising.” In such approaches, communication promotes the need for sustainability at the material and technical levels with a common goal of preserving natural resources. This is just one dimension of sustainability.

The power of communication should be understood in a broader sense. As stated in a UNEP publication, “communication, at its best, has an extraordinary power, not only to inform, but to inspire . . . it can achieve lasting and meaningful effect.”⁷ In the field of communication studies, Campos (2005) asserts that communication as a cultural-biological mechanism of interaction is central in all sustainability processes. Embodied in this statement is the idea that communication, either as a product or a process, is culturally-based and meaningful; it is not simply a technical tool for transmitting information.

Thus, the challenge of communicating sustainability is not limited to designing environmentally-related advertisements or exposing the negative impact of printing and other media activities on the natural environment. Instead, it also encompasses the use of design objects to communicate meanings, impressions, and ideas that have long-term worth in the

⁶ UNEP & Futerra, *Communicating sustainability – How to produce effective public campaigns*, 2005.

⁷ Ibid.

cultural environment. Such communication is not something tangible or something capable of being quantitatively measured, but the aspirations, heritage, memory and meanings that are of value to human beings.

That visual communication design (visual design) has a role to play in this undertaking is revealed in design discourse. In the 1999 *SEGD Annual Conference*, for example, designers discussed issues such as: How do we develop communication today that will effectively deliver its message across time?⁸ The 2004 *ICOGRADA Conference*⁹ raised the question: How can visual communication contribute to a sustainable future for all life on earth? In 2005, *the World Design Congress*¹⁰ called for a review of the older concept of visual design as a means to enhance the aesthetic and functional virtues of visual communication, declaring visual objects as having far more potential power to enhance the lives of people and benefit the society. Apparently, the world's major design professional organizations have come to recognize the relevance and responsibility of visual design to communicate sustainability in the cultural respect.

I speak from the discipline of visual design. On one hand, I question: what makes visual artifacts powerful and capable of enhancing the quality of people's lives? On the other hand, I wonder: what kind of human visual experience is likely to evoke a sense of cultural sustainability? This dissertation explores these issues, based on two premises: sustainability ought to be communicated beyond the domain of environmental protection; the visual discipline could and should be an integral part of the endeavor.

⁸ Brill cited in Telford, *Design Annual*, 1999, article on *Society of Environmental Graphic Design 19th Annual Conference*, Cincinnati, Ohio, May 1999.

⁹ *International Council of Graphic Design Association Conference 2004*, Sao Paulo, Brazil, 23-30 April 2004.

¹⁰ *Era 05 - World Design Congress*, Copenhagen, Oslo, Gothenburg, Helsinki, 22-28 September 2005.

1.1 The broad research problem: visual communication and sustainability

The possibility of visual objects as a means of communicating sustainability affairs in the public sphere is grounded in long-existing discussion. On the centrality and communicative functions of the visual in our everyday life, Simmel (1921) had argued a century ago for the enormous significance of the visual mode in social life. He identified how the society, as a seen world, conveys messages and embodies cultural meanings through the forms and visuals it contains. In the 1980s, Gombrich (1982) characterized city life as visual-intensive – people are bombarded with visual objects morning until night, indoors and outdoors. But visuals, in his view, also act as social codes that evoke a sense of cultural value. Gombrich's claim is probable. The immaterial meanings of visual objects, permeate our culture in a semiotic sense and are often manifested in and disseminated through the qualities of form, which sometimes occurs in the visual mode.

Design is partly responsible for the production of visual objects and the communication of their meanings. There has been a poor level of reflection in the design research community on the diffused production of material and immaterial artifacts from which we built the daily environment,¹¹ however. Manzini (1995), an important thinker in design and sustainability, envisages a world in which human beings not merely survive but also express and expand their cultural possibilities through tangible objects. I argue that such are the ways in which the cultural dimensions of sustainability can be manifested. Design philosopher Fry (1999) holds that contribution to sustainability may happen not only in a biophysical sense, but also a cultural sense; that biophysical ecology is not of a higher order of importance than the ecology of visual (242). This assertion constitutes a reason why visual design and visual research could contribute to sustainability in the cultural sense.

The considerable insight into the cultural-visual manifestations of sustainability

¹¹ Manzini, *Discovering design*, 1995.

makes the issue comprehensible but has yet to attract more attention from the research community. This dissertation takes a first step in considering the integration of visual communication with cultural sustainability. An inquiry into the problem is timely and crucial for it illuminates the path to contributing to the global effort of sustainability research.

1.2 The specific problem: communicating cultural sustainability in housing

I contextualize the wider problem in the particular setting of Hong Kong public housing (housing), as a venue in which to explore the specific research problem of communicating cultural sustainability by environmental visual objects in public rental housing (PRH) estates.

Cultural sustainability is the cultural component of sustainability whose quest is “a concern for human wellbeing of the long-range future” (Gallopín 2002). It corresponds to cultural vitality, referring to the “fourth pillar of sustainability” (Hawkes 2001), considered essential to a healthy and sustainable society along with the other three pillars – economic viability, ecological balance and social equity. Examples of attributes identified in the literature include articulating community identity and sustaining collective memory. In the housing context, Chiu (2004) indicates that cultural sustainability is an ideal form of cultural value underpinning housing community design that may be communicated by visual forms in residential settings. Building on Chiu’s contention, I looked for empirical evidence for this claim in the visual environment of housing.

Hong Kong has the largest public housing scheme in the world in terms of the proportion of the population directly housed by the government – almost 50%.¹² Despite its “non-elite,” “low-cost” nature, the large-scale program maintains, in many newly built estates, sophisticated visual environments that contrast with the homogeneous appearance of

¹² *Housing and social change*, 2003, 25.

earlier housing. The placement of stylishly designed and attractive objects, specifically architectural estate name signs (name signs), public art and sculpture (public art), enhances and embellishes the visual appearance, and thereby, the overall resident experience of these neighborhoods. The prevalence of signs and public art fascinates me. The visual dynamics constitute what I call the “new signage” and “estate art” phenomenon.

However, there is the general perception that residents’ everyday experience of signs and public art seem unimportant in their lives. I argue that such a perception requires investigation. Although the study of signage has not been academically appreciated as other forms of visual communication such as advertising, and the impact of public art remains, for the most part, the realm of fine art research,¹³ design research should not trivialize their cultural value – I undertake this research from a sustainability perspective.

To be sure, any study of the visual environment could be easily captivated by issues of functional utility or environmental aesthetics – these being core issues of visual design. But do the objects in housing environments act only as visual orientation, and as artistic enhancement? German design professor Burdek (2005) addresses the limitation of an purely aesthetic perspective on design, “Due to the multiplicity of interactions involved in design, creating a theory of design with aesthetics at its core would certainly not have been sufficient” (273).

This dissertation departs from functionalist or aesthetic considerations to focus on the cultural objectives of the visual phenomenon: to serve as meaningful expressions of residents’ identity and aspirations in a lively and dynamic community and to provide visual evidence of the continuity of a changing culture and society. Still further, my professional background and local knowledge enable me to conceive of the design phenomenon as a visual strategy that is essential in housing. I consider it a cultural policy that the Hong Kong

¹³ See Gallagher & LaWare 2007, and LaWare & Gallagher, in press, for an exception of this.

Housing Authority (the Authority) uses to respond to the psychological needs of relocated residents and to reinforce the sense of community of its vast population, who belong to a society still undergoing socio-political transformation in the post-1997 Hong Kong era.¹⁴

Grounded in design discourse and upon reflection, my initial questions are: How do visual objects such as name signs and public art reflect or influence a residential community's shared ideals and values about life? What are the meanings and values signified in their appearance and design? With the design and themes they take on, how do they impact the feelings of people who encounter the objects on an everyday basis? What meaning do residents make of the phenomenon through lived experience? How do such meanings reveal residents' perceptions of self of the community of which they are members? In other words, I am searching for the potential of the visual phenomenon to evoke in and for residents a sense of cultural sustainability.

To answer the questions, there is a need for appropriate philosophical positions from which to conceptualize the phenomenon of interest. I explored the scope of interpretive communication theories for a philosophical understanding of visual-human interaction.

1.3 Theoretical foundations

Kennedy (1999) claims that all communication, verbal and visual alike, involves rhetoric, which is a phenomenon of human culture; Eco (1976) states that in culture every entity can become a semiotic phenomenon. They both emphasize the use of symbols and signs as a basic condition of culture and society. It is through common signs that we understand the world; our experience is present to us through their significations. Ricoeur

¹⁴ Hong Kong ceased to be a dependent territory of the United Kingdom and became a Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China on July 1, 1997. The recent development of public housing in Hong Kong is set against a particular socio-cultural and political backdrop of the HKSAR.

(1976) also notices an excess of meaning not exhausted by significations: “Is the verbal signification the whole signification? Is there not a surplus of meaning which goes beyond the sign?” (45)

I reflected on his insight within the context of my study: What is the surplus of meaning that may escape the grasp of semiotics in residents’ experience of environmental objects? Apart from the obvious visual signification, do people’s experiences of the sign bring to mind something that is more personal, such as memory of the past or aspirations for the future? I use phenomenology to locate the richness of meaning in people’s experience, in the belief that, all communication is a phenomenology by forces of being regulated by experience (Lanigan 1988).

Applying these scholars’ remarks to my research problem, I made a supposition that ideas of sustainability can be communicated and perceived in a mechanism that involves visual signification and the viewing experience, and that the nature of the design objects used for communication are rhetorical. I examined and synthesized the variety of theories and their assumptions to come up with what I call an integrated theoretical model of visual communication that combines rhetoric, semiotics and phenomenology.

I systemized the inquiry’s theoretical orientation in this framework. All visuals were postulated as rhetorical, that is, they were assumed to seek persuasion toward important values through the use of symbolic expression in design. Semiotics discovers the signification of visual objects, addresses meaning making within a cultural context. Phenomenology reveals perceptions and viewing experiences of people within their personal context and “lived experience.”¹⁵

The rhetoric-semiotics-phenomenology (RSP) framework provides a new way to conceptualize the nature and functioning of design, meanings and experiences in

¹⁵ Human lived experience, in the phenomenological tradition, is the “lifeworld” as it is lived, felt, undergone, made sense of, and accomplished by human beings (Schwandt 1998)

visual-human communication situations. Applied to this inquiry, the RSP model helps to elucidate the function of environmental visual objects as sustaining culture in housing. The theories also shed light on the formulation of a multi-method research strategy appropriate to exploring this type of research problem. I suggest that the whole visual communication process could be understood in a semiotic phenomenology of visual rhetoric, in the sense that semiotics and phenomenology each offer theoretical and methodological tools to investigate visual rhetoric. I elaborate on the process of the inquiry in chapter 7.

1.4 Purposes of study

The theoretical purpose is primary to the dissertation. The purpose is threefold. (1) To construct a theoretical model of visual communication as a theoretical basis by which to conceptualize the mechanisms through which visual design and human experience interact. What I call the “RSP framework” defines the perspectives from which design, meanings, and experiences of visual phenomenon can be conceptualized and studied. (2) To develop a notion about the nature of cultural sustainability – that it is visually accessible. Establishing the “visuality of cultural sustainability” is a step taken to substantiate the amenability of cultural sustainability to visual investigation. (3) To show that such performance of visual design may benefit human experience and the community as a whole, thus an ethical function.

It was my methodological purpose to develop a systematic approach to visual research by developing the “concurrent nested qual+QUAL” strategy for use in the inquiry. The strategy integrates semiotic analysis and phenomenological investigation as approaches to understanding meaning and experience of name signs and public art.

The practical purpose of the study was to build a substantiated empirical case in the PRH estates of Hong Kong to illustrate a theoretical proposition about the

communication and perception of cultural sustainability. The RSP framework provided philosophical underpinnings and the mixed-method approach, concurrent nested qual+QUAL, served as the research strategy for the inquiry.

1.5 Methodology

Methodology, as used here, is “a theoretically informed plan of action in relation to an empirical field” (Jensen 2002, 258). The methodology employed for my inquiry including my research strategy strives to maintain integrity with the RSP theoretical framework including semiotics and phenomenology. So I developed the “concurrent nested qual+QUAL” approach by combining two qualitative strategies – the less dominant socio-semiotics (Gottdiener 1995) and the dominant phenomenology (Van Manen 1997, Lanigan 1988, Moustakas 1994). The former strategy is nested within the latter strategy concurrently informing the data collection methods – standardized interview and conversational interview. (More details of the approach is presented in chapter 7.)

The mixed-method research strategy serves as the interface between underlying theories and my methods of data collection and data analysis. It was capable of taking into consideration the range of theoretical traditions that drove my research; it was also capable of answering different research questions ranging from cultural meanings of design to lived meanings of experience. The strategy guided my choice of data collection methods – qualitative interviewing made up of primarily phenomenological interviews and standardized open-ended interviews. Open-ended questions focused on eliciting residents’ perceptions and meanings in the design of name signs and public art. These questions were embedded within the more in-depth phenomenological interview questions raised in an informal conversational format based on an interview guide. The goal of the phenomenologically-oriented questions was is to generate dialogue, to derive full descriptions of residents’ first-person accounts of

their experience engaging with the visuals.

At the level of data analysis, a socio-semiotic framework was used to analyze residents' readings of designs and to integrate them with my own reading, resulting in the seven cultural codes of visuals. These codes define culturally-embraced meanings, providing the basis for residents to develop the more private feelings about their own experiences as they live them. Phenomenological analysis uses data reduction techniques of "horizontalization" and "definition" to derive from the descriptive data a set of phenomenological themes. The units of lived meanings offered insights into residents' perception of a culturally sustainable community thus regarded as "perceived attributes of cultural sustainability." Through further analytic reflection of the participants' stories, five interpretive positions, or experiential conditions underlying their visual experience, were uncovered. These phenomenological themes and interpretive positions, I argue, are the essences of experience.

1.6 Rationale

This dissertation was triggered by international design associations' calls to rethink the relevance of visual communication to sustainable development efforts (see page 3). In addition, there are two underlying rationales, both of which grew out of my professional convictions regarding: (1) the need to uncover the facets of good in visual design in response to negative discourse about the impact of visual on humans and society and (2) the need to advocate the communication of cultural sustainability as an ethical visual practice.

The last decade saw an increase in discourse that takes a critical stance toward examining contemporary visual phenomenon (e.g. Bouman 1994; Van Toorn 1998). Many critics point out that we are having problems surviving in a social-cultural and immaterial

ecology in which people are surrounded by “signs, codes, language, assumed meaning and attempted communication.” (e.g. Fry 1999) Others speak of “semiotic pollution” (Manzini 1995) brought about by visual images and their deviated meanings. Papanek (1995), guided by an ethical view in his social-ecological criticism, contends that many graphic design artifacts are “mere appearance . . . flamboyant gesture . . .” Debord (1967 cited in Barnard) describes modern society as “the society of the spectacle;” he critiques the central importance of image and the visual in degrading social life.

Condemnations abound but few researchers attempted to research whether, how, and to what extent the multitude of visuals surrounding us has positive impact, especially on people’s inner experience. In other disciplines, such as psychology, Bramston (2002) states, “positive psychology is enjoying an unprecedented resurgence . . . a growing impatience amongst researchers to understand the positive aspects of life and associated emotions.” I feel compelled to advocate for a shift in focus from the negative to the positive aspects of a visual impact on human experience.

As a public information designer, I am engaged in social production. My previous professional experience draws me to presume and strive to promote positive human relations through visual information. My thought is influenced by visual critic Barbara Stafford (1996) who, in *Good-looking: Essays on the Virtue of Images*, seeks to demonstrate the capacity of visuals for positive intervention in an age when people are losing faith in the creation of “good” images.

My dissertation presents an alternative view to mainstream criticism, in Stafford’s words, it looks for “the pleasures, beauties, consolations . . .” possibly produced by the visual – “an unfashionable positive view” as she admits. Whether it is unfashionable is not an issue: by this work I want to substantiate the potential advantages of visuals in doing

good¹⁶ for humans in everyday life situations, and thereby address a gap in current theorizing about the value of visual artifacts.

Specifically, the inquiry demonstrates that communicating ideas of cultural sustainability is beneficial to humans, and hence ethical. Given the established purpose and ambition of design research – “contribution to knowledge” – Dilnot (2004) reminds us that knowledge should not be limited purely to that of design but should also be about humans, too. He maintains that conveying the idea of being humane, making things [including their meanings] “sustainable” stands as the goal of design research¹⁷ today. This inquiry shows how design creates meanings in visuals that are “comforting” to humans. In doing so, I link the visual with the ethical.

My view is that working within visual communication one cannot ignore visual ethics – the study of how images (visuals) are used in communication to affect the ways we think and feel, for good or bad in the human pursuit of a beneficent life (Newton 2004). I did not attempt or pretend to explain the philosophy of ethics which exceeds the scope of this study. But I adopted the philosopher Harries’ (1997) contention that ethical function can be related to the articulation of man’s ethos. “By a person’s ethos we mean his or her character, nature, or disposition. Similarly we speak of a community’s ethos, referring to the spirit that presides over its activities.” (4) For Harries, architecture serves a common ethos; for me, environmental visual objects, by expressing meanings and the spirit of housing residents, also articulate the ethos of the community, hence are ethical. This line of thought is not a focus of inquiry; it serves as a rationale, pointing out why this inquiry is important to do.

¹⁶ A philosophical interpretation of the term “good” can be divided into “intrinsic goods” and “instrumental goods,” a problem in ethics (Olson 1967). Having a sense of cultural sustainability contributes to people’s intrinsic goods rather than instrumental goods.

¹⁷ Easterby, already in the 80s, disapproved the over-subscription of research on computer-mediated visual information to conference or seminars (1984). He spoke of a need for de-emphasizing and compensating for by discussing areas of visual design not allied to computer generation techniques.

1.7 Delimitations

The inquiry is confined to an examination of static visual objects in the physical environment. Static refers to objects with physical rather than digital form, and a use of the object that is neither interactive nor ephemeral. Visual objects in this study were further restricted to public-oriented works – those intended for use and viewed by people from all segments of a population. Hong Kong PRH estates were where my fieldwork took place, so discussion of environmental objects in private developments goes outside the study boundaries.

Theoretically, rhetoric grounds assumptions about the persuasive nature of visuals and their consequences. Despite this grounding, the inquiry was not a rhetorical criticism of visual design but a qualitative communication inquiry; its approach sought to reveal a semiotic phenomenology of visual rhetoric.

Methodologically, the inquiry did not attempt to address the overall cultural impact of the design phenomenon. Nor does it contribute to art criticism, since this dissertation takes public art sculptures as design objects; many of the artworks under study are known to be the work of designers. The inquiry did not attempt to measure evidence of cultural sustainability quantitatively; rather, it aims at increasing our qualitative understanding of the potential role of visuals in promoting cultural sustainability, and thereby, illuminates a still “immature” concept. Such are some built-in limits to the scope of study and of my research methodology.

1.8 Chapter outline

This overview chapter distinguishes two levels of my research problem: first, a broad theoretical uncertainty about the relationship between visual communication and

cultural sustainability; second, a specific empirical concern regarding the role of environmental visual objects in promoting the cultural sustainability of the public housing community. I also identify the lack of theoretical and methodological models appropriate for systematically exploring the problem. An important aspect of this chapter is to provide a rationale that justifies the study – what led me to become interested in the objects of study and why the topics of visual communication and cultural sustainability are worthy of investigation.

There are five parts to this dissertation. Part I is its theoretical grounding, composed of two chapters. Chapter 2 reviews and examines the theories of rhetoric, semiotics, and phenomenology, resulting in the construction of an integrated theoretical model of visual communication – the RSP framework. It serves as the philosophical basis for understanding the nature and functioning of visuals, and of human experience engaging with visual phenomenon.

Chapter 3 reviews literature under the two topical areas of visual communication and cultural sustainability. It clarifies some visually-related terms and concepts. In particular, from the literature of visual culture I draw the term “visuality,” which in the field means “seeing” as a social and cultural process; it denotes also the visible character of value-laden design/cultural phenomenon. I determine its significance in terms of manifesting cultural sustainability. The chapter goes on to define “culture” for the purpose of this study and to highlight its visual availability. A brief history and evolving models of cultural sustainability are presented; eight attributes are identified from current interpretations. The chapter ends with my critical synthesis of the two bodies of knowledge into a proposed notion of visuality of cultural sustainability. This notion underlies the significance of the visual mode in manifesting and communicating ideas of sustainability to the public, which is identified as a gap in knowledge that needs to be addressed.

Part II develops the research inquiry necessary to filling the knowledge gap.

Chapter 4 introduces the specific context chosen for studying the research problem. Chapter 5 applies the theoretical understanding gained from the RSP framework and the visibility of cultural sustainability to the concrete situation of public housing. Here, I present a proposition about what is going on with regard to the communication and the perception of cultural sustainability by visual means in housing. This proposition leads to the formulation of my “particularizing research questions” (Maxwell 1992). The working definitions of terms used in the dissertation are then presented.

Part III describes the paradigm and methodology employed in the empirical study. Chapter 6 gives an overview of two contrasting perspectives on the study of visual communication, especially in terms of their relevance to communicating sustainability. It then outlines some assumptions about interpretivism, the paradigm underlying my research strategy. The chapter explains why a single over-arching paradigm is appropriate to guide the overall research, followed by component paradigms associated with individual research questions.

Chapter 7 develops the concurrent nested qual-QUAL research strategy by taking into consideration the theoretical traditions of semiotics and phenomenology. It articulates my action plan for getting in the natural setting of housing for a field study. I present my role as the researcher; I explain the significance of my role as the human instrument within the approaches of semiotics and phenomenology. The sampling logic for selecting the units of analysis is presented. The rest of the chapter is devoted to delineating the data collection and data analysis methods. It ends with a discussion of the trustworthiness of the inquiry – how I can attain validity in my findings by the measures taken in the methodological procedure.

Part IV is the results chapter. Just as there is no model for conducting and analyzing my exploratory research, there is no simple model for writing the findings. So, based on the interpretive premise of the study, I attempt an “innovative articulation” of the analytic results. Chapter 8 reports the findings in six separate sections. It begins with my

reflective description (bracketing) of the research setting which is theorized as a rhetorical situation in some semiotic neighborhoods. Section 2 provides vignettes from nine individual residents' experience in their everyday visual environment, followed by some general findings in section 3. Sections 4 through 6 present the thematized findings including the seven codes of visuals, seven phenomenological themes, and five interpretive positions (or experiential conditions). Themes and positions are the essences of experience because of their essential quality – being evocative of a sense of cultural sustainability in residents.

Part V is devoted to a discussion of the inquiry itself and of its implications for research and practice. Chapter 9 can be taken as a conclusion about the inquiry. It is a synthesis and interpretation of all the qualitative findings and categories of meanings. Insight and understanding gained from the findings provide empirical support for my proposition presented in chapter 5. But only through further reflective interpretation can I determine the significance and contribution of these findings. They are discussed in chapter 10 as research implications for visual communication and sustainability research. This final chapter also draws attention to several limitations of the inquiry.

Finally, the chapter suggests that future research can build on what is done or initiated in the inquiry. Three major research agenda are recommended for design research: to better conceptualize the nature of sustainability communication, especially the visual modes of communicating sustainability; to further establish the role of visual rhetoric in communicating sustainability; and to substantiate its positive human implications as an ethical function.

Figure 1.1 is a flow chart of the overall research process. It utilizes the “conceptual funnel metaphor” (Marshall & Rossman 1999, 29) to show: how the research has developed from conceptualization of the research problem, to a specific investigation; and how its outcomes and implications possibly contribute to research and practice in related fields of study. Broken arrows imply possible expansion of the literature as a significant contribution made by this inquiry.

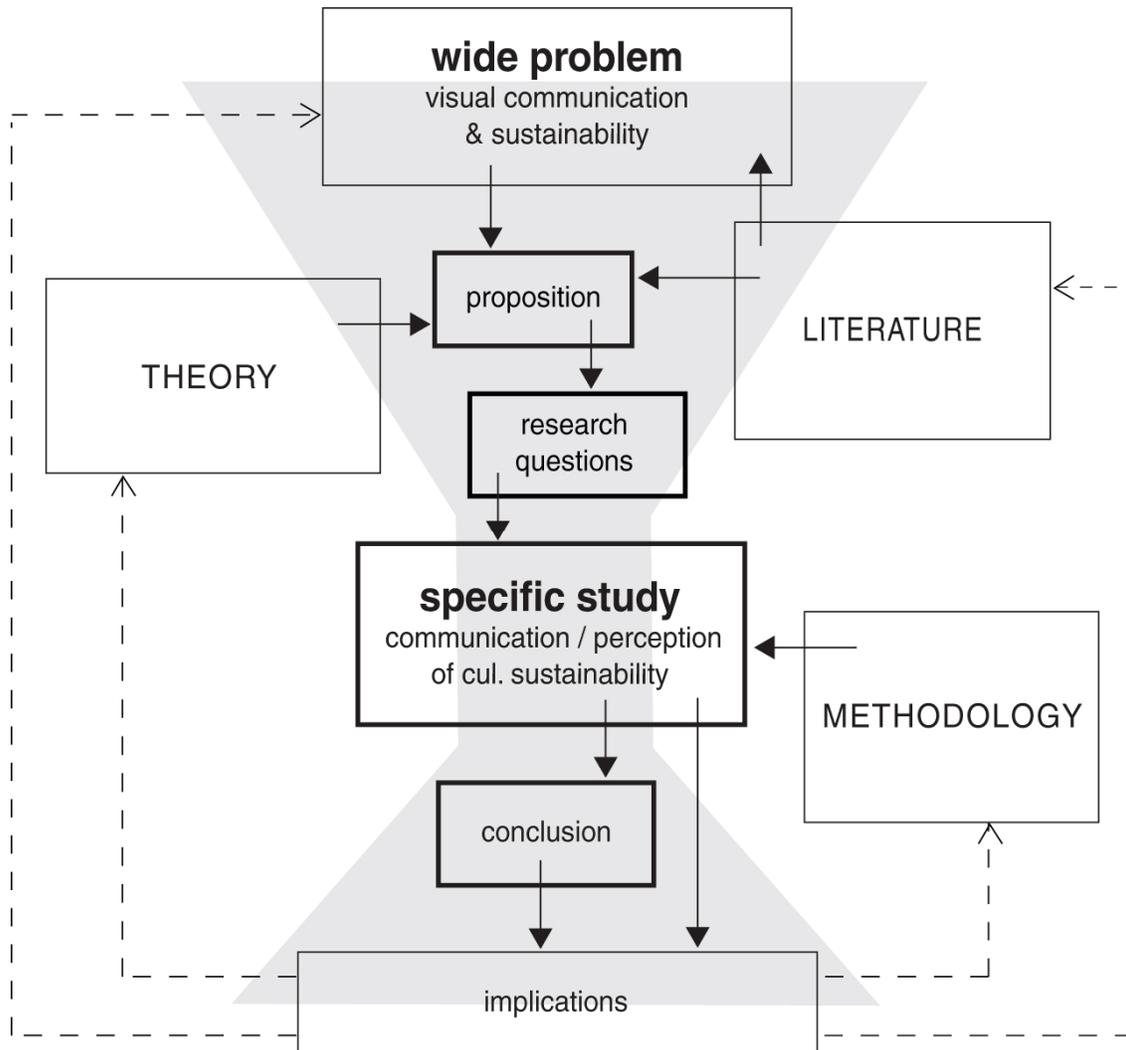


Figure 1.1
Flow chart of the research process.

PART I
THEORY & LITERATURE

Constructing a theoretical framework

All communication involves rhetoric.

(Kennedy 1999)

All communication is semiotic by force of being constituted and regulated by systems of signs.

(Lanigan 1988)

All communication is a phenomenology by force of being constituted and regulated by consciousness of experience . . .

(Lanigan 1988)

By “theoretical framework,” I mean a network of related theories, a coherent set of postulates about the nature and functioning of some aspects of the world (Locke 2000), that affords “a conceptual linking across theories” (Hart 1995). Three interpretive communication theories – rhetoric, semiotics, and phenomenology – were utilized in constructing the framework for the study. Visual communication, a human activity that involves the production of meaning, is an aspect of the world explored in this dissertation that necessitates a theoretical basis by which to account for its nature and functioning in the world.

2.1 The need for theory and reflection

Visual communication is an old practice, but as a discipline it is relatively young. Unlike traditional academic disciplines, its philosophical roots are diffused.¹⁸ Few central or unifying theories are available to provide a conceptual foundation for a systematic understanding of visually communicative situations. Visual critic Moriarty (1995) says that the area represents intersections of thought from many diverse traditions. Indeed, visual communication as an academic subject is widely studied across a variety of fields including communication and rhetoric, psychology, social science, art and design;¹⁹ most of these fields have established theoretical traditions, except design. The fact that visual design lacks a comprehensive theoretical framework to address its problems of concern bothers some design scholars.

Design educator Wild (1982) notices the lack of general theory or “unified field” theory of design; it follows that formal critique in visual design has been personally generated. Really, theories and principles of design, even available and useful to visual practice, are largely formal, and thereby inadequate to explaining their cultural implications. The limitation of formal theory to address design becomes clearer if we realize the social nature of the discipline and practice.

Consider design critic Kinross’ (1986) comment, “designing, being a social

¹⁸ Moriarty & Barbatsis, *Handbook of visual communication*, 2005.

¹⁹ Graphic design, or more precisely, environmental graphic design, is the field which creates signage design. But Bonsiepe (1994) suggests that with technological innovations, the limitations of the traditional concept of graphic design are apparent because it is closely linked to “printing” even it involves visualization and the creation of image. This dissertation uses the term “visual communication design,” to refer to the design work and the design field. Reference is also made to Frascara’s (1997) definition of visual communication design: an activity directed at affecting the knowledge, the attitudes and the behavior of people. In this dissertation, I mean to have the term subsume graphic design in the environment, information design, as well as public art since the latter is increasingly produced as design-oriented work. Visual communication is multi-disciplinary; the term is gradually adopted to include fields of study that have common interest in the visual (see Moriarty & Barbatsis 2005).

activity, will remain out of reach of formal theory.” Design historian Dilnot (1989) notes that the most significant aspect about design is that it is produced, received, and used within an emphatically social context. In this sense, it is the meaning, rather than the functional aspects, of visual communication that deserve immediate attention by the design research community. Not surprisingly, Burdek (2005) claims, “The [design] discipline’s constant crisis of meaning is in fact an expression of its increased need for theory and reflection” (227).

Apparently, visual design practice needs a philosophical understanding of its activity and of its significance to human beings and to culture and society. I took on the task to search for theories, and to reflect on their appropriateness to research. I explored different philosophical traditions just to recognize that no single theory can cover all the aspects and features of communicative situations within socio-cultural contexts – there is a need to integrate various theories.

Initial ideas came from communication researcher Lindlof (1995) who states, “The fundamental interest of communication is rhetorical inquiries, social construction of meaning and semiotics” (247). Influence also came from Burdek (2005) who asserts that semiotics, phenomenology and hermeneutics are the central fields of knowing for design. The framework of visual communication being constructed, therefore, incorporates models of rhetoric, semiotics, and phenomenology. They are used to illuminate each element of visual communication for addressing the interconnected issues of design, meaning and the experience of visual communication. Figure 2.1 maps the main sources from literature I used to construct the framework. It also shows the original references for some authors.

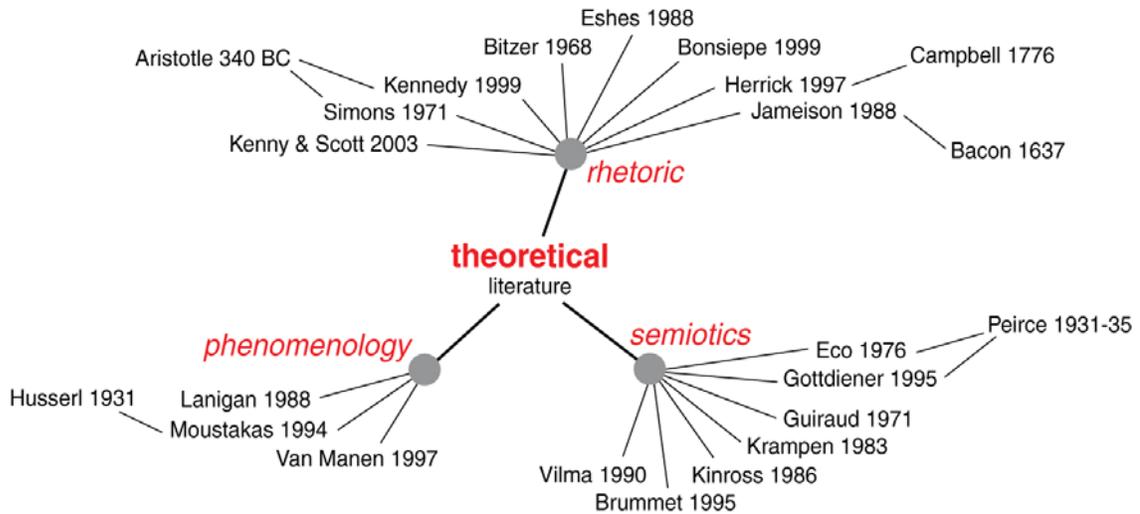


Figure 2.1
Main sources from literature on rhetoric, semiotics and phenomenology.

2.2 Rhetoric

Rhetoric served mainly as an overarching theory in this research. It provided broad explanation about the characteristics of visuals as they pertain to the communication of cultural sustainability in housing. An important rhetorical principle underlying this study was that virtually all communication is rhetorical; that is, it seeks persuasion of some message to some particular audience. Drawing from historical accounts about the nature of rhetoric, I lay a theoretical foundation on which to conceive the phenomenon of new signage and estate art as visual rhetoric.

2.2.1 Design as rhetoric

In ancient Greece, Aristotle (340 B.C.) defines rhetoric as the capacity

discovering the available means of persuasion through style or other rhetorical figures.²⁰

Bacon, four centuries ago, drew attention to the visual as a possible means of rhetoric, “It is the office of Rhetoric to make pictures of virtue and goodness so that they may be seen” (1637 in Jameison 1988), foreshadowing the emergence of contemporary visual rhetoric and its resemblance to visual design in the contemporary sense. Campbell, in late 18th century Britain, described rhetoric as “that art by which discourse is adapted to its end” (1776 in Herrick 1997) emphasizing its purposiveness or intentionality, and its consideration for audience. Simons’ (1971) “new rhetoric”²¹ stresses the social values of rhetoric.

Bitzer (1968) defines rhetoric as situational, responsive to a particular kind of circumstances, which are marked by an “exigence” – an imperfect situation capable of positive modification by rhetorical action. Similarly, Simon’s (1981) influential definition of design, emphasizes the situational characteristics of rhetoric, “. . . devising actions that are aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones.” Bonsiepe (1999) states that where there’s coercion there is no rhetoric – implying rhetoric’s resemblance to design, which in contemporary society does not try to force changes on the unwilling.

My way of thinking about the nature of visual design represents a synthesis of classical and new rhetorical concepts. The relevance of rhetoric to design lies in the parallels between their respective definitions and goals identified by a number of scholars (see figure 2.1). In fact, Twyman (1979) and Bonsiepe (1965 in Kinross 1989) both hold that ancient rhetoric resembles modern design, because both arts deal with functional, contextual, and social aspects of language and symbol systems.

In *Rhetoric and the Art of Design*, Kaufer and Butler (1996) argue that rhetoric belongs to the family of design arts like architecture and graphics, as all of these are arts of

²⁰ *Rhetoric*, 1355b cited in Herrick 1997, 78.

²¹ The “new rhetoric” described by Simons (1971) is offered as a supplement rather than a substitute for the “old rhetoric.”

production. They conclude that theories of rhetoric are theories of design. Ehses (1988), a design educator, finds rhetorical theory relevant for information design by virtues of its three operational functions – to instruct, to move, to please.

Table 2.1
Parallels between design and rhetoric.

design	rhetoric
design is devising actions that are aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones (Simon 1981)	rhetoric responds to imperfect situations which are capable of positive modification by rhetorical actions (Bitzer 1968)
<i>values and goals:</i>	<i>values and goals:</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● explanation, persuasion, identification - 'the graphic triangle' (Brown 1979) ● achieving the functional, the pleasurable, and the moral - the 3 senses of good (Sless 1996) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● to inform, evaluate, persuade, elevate, please, depict (Ehninger 1971) ● to enlighten the understanding, please the imagination, move the passion, influence the will (Campbell 1719-1796)

2.2.2 Rhetoric from verbal to visual

It is mainly the area of visual design to which these authors connect rhetoric. But the general focus of rhetoric from ancient times to just a few decades ago has been on language, on the verbal aspects of communication. Notably, Aristotle's art of persuasion is utilized in developing speech or writing that persuades the listener or the reader to establish favorable impressions of the speaker and content of speech. Burke (1970) describes language as written and spoken words that can be manipulated, redefined, altered and reinvented through rhetoric to create new meanings.

More recently, the visual aspects of rhetoric in communication receive a share of the attention from scholars on rhetoric. Kennedy (1991 in Herrick 1997) defines rhetoric as the energy inherent in emotion and thought transmitted through a system of signs to influence others. He contends that the verbal language is just one kind of symbol system among many others that have rhetorical purpose and function. Kenny and Scott (2003) write about the second half of the 20th century, a time when contemporary life is characterized by the proliferation of posters, magazines, television, which they call “visual conduits for persuasion”. Visual researchers Emmison and Smith (2000) maintain that visual objects in space, such as signage, public art, and buildings, carry meanings to influence people. Discussions in these fields indicate the rise in discourse on visual rhetoric used in the public domain.

2.2.3 Visual rhetoric

This dissertation deals with visual communication in a rhetorical framework. It assumes the persuasion of people through the use of visual artifacts as well as words. Visual rhetoric could be understood as (1) a field of study, (2) a method or principle of visual design, and (3) a type of visual communication.

As a field of study, visual rhetoric is grounded in an expanded notion of rhetoric that involves ‘not only the study of literature and speech, but of culture, art, and even science’ (Kenney and Scott 2003), all of which demand the use of visuals for expression or explanation. Note that not only is culture the object of study, but culture is also the setting required for any rhetorical action to take place because it provides the context out of which meaning is made. To work well, verbal and visual rhetoric must operate within a culture that favors the ideas and meanings embodied in visual forms.

As a method, visual rhetoric is the persuasive use of visual signs in the creation

and management of meanings – the first goal of rhetoric. A rhetorical approach is strategic and differs from other visual approaches in five ways; it (1) is more complex and sustained, (2) is more deliberate, (3) entails artistic, (4) is mindful of ends and users, and (5) addresses public (Beale 1987). It functions to shape values, to shape knowledge, and to build community through the use of symbolic expression or signs (Herrick 1997).

As a communication, visual rhetoric refers to artifacts that are designed with a particular persuasive goal – to create meanings that influence a particular audience in regards to their beliefs, feelings and actions. But how can its influence function to desirable ethical ends? Two ancient rhetorical concepts, *enargeia*²² (vividness) and *eudaimonia* (human wellbeing) are chosen to illustrate the good of rhetorical power.

Enargeia is a means and a quality of rhetoric – “the power of visuals that takes the audience into the vivid presence of an object by attempting to place things before their eyes” (Sharpling 2004); the result of “full, exhaustive, vivid visual depiction of experience . . . gives pleasure to viewer” (Lunde 2004). In this connection, *enargeia* involves the performance of visual design; it maintains a striking resemblance to the affective qualities of form that all visual designers strive to accomplish.

Related more to humans, *eudaimonia* is a rhetorical concept that originated in Aristotle’s thinking about wellbeing, pleasure and happiness. *Eudaimonic wellbeing* (Ryan & Deci 2001) is the experience of enriching activities, of vitality, in people who live in groups, a condition of human flourishing. It is a rhetorical consequence in human beings. (See table 2.2 for the characteristics of the two ancient concepts that can be used to explore

²² Confusion takes place between “*energeia*” and “*enargeia*” as both terms refer to rhetoric’s power or energy to act or represent reality as vividly as can be. The distinction between them can be understood as follows: *Energeia* specifically means “internal activity” (Steffensmeier 2005). It involves doing and action by the use of lively language or words in the production of vividness in thoughts and action of the audience. *Enargeia* is used in the sense that a rhetorical object or artifact has a powerful visual appeal for the audience. It expresses vividly the event visually described to create meanings in the minds, and move the emotions, of the audience. *Enargeia* has more to do with visual image, it is therefore adopted in this dissertation.

contemporary visual design.)

The inquiry assumes that enargeia, the creation of vividness in both the visual and its meanings, enhance and reinforce cultural values encoded in name signs and public art. Its goal is to consequently evoke in residents a sense of cultural sustainability, which is directed towards eudaimonia, or wellbeing. My research looks for evidence of enargeia and eudaimonia in visual design and from residents' accounts of their visual experience.

Table 2.2
Characteristics of two ancient rhetorical concepts: enargeia and eudaimonia.

enargeia (vividness)	eudaimonia (wellbeing)
brings into presense, to the sight and mind, that which is absent	expression of viture
full, vivid visual depiction of experience	enriching activities, of vitality, in people who live in groups
conveys invisible significance through visual depiction	expressiveness of deeply held values
gives pleasure to the viewer	fulfillment
persuasive capacity related to ideas	a condition for human flourishing
evokes a sense of wonder	culturally rooted
combines theatrical description with authentic account	focuses on meanings and self-realization
a rhetorical performance	a rhetorical consequence

If rhetoric embeds qualities in a visual communication to create intended meanings, how then do those meanings that eventually grow out of one's interpretation of

visual rhetoric in his particular context? How could we know the signification²³ of the visuals? This leads to the semiotic dimensions of design. Semiotics and rhetoric share roots in the traditions of classical rhetoric (Zulick 2004); both involve the study of any medium as a sign system. The close link between them is perhaps best described by Eco (1976) – “stylistic encoding.” He indicates how rhetoric relates to semiotics, “A theory of sign must take into account the labor performed in order to overcode and to switch codes . . . the activity is commonly registered under the heading of rhetoric” (276). He speaks of “semiotically-oriented rhetoric” (277) – encoding in the production of the sign.

What is indicated is that when a sign stands in for an object, a representation, or a symbol, the representation or symbol is possibly rhetorical. I presume the multitude of visual objects as comprising a set of rhetorical signs, and the visual phenomenon of name signs and public art as constituting some sign systems.

2.3 Semiotics

I go beyond rhetoric to consider semiotics as another constituent of the RSP framework. Semiotics is used here as both a theory and a research strategy. It is a theoretical approach to the study of communication as well as a structural analysis used in the study of signs, or systems of signs, which make up a communication system. Although it is socio-semiotics that is invoked in the inquiry at the strategic level, the basic concepts of traditional semiotics apply to all its branches at the theoretical level. Discussed here are some ideas and assumptions of semiotics pertinent to the inquiry; they represent just a small part of complex semiotic terminologies.

²³ “Signification” is meaning of the sign in specific context. It indicates both the processes by which events, words, behaviors and objects carry meaning for the members of a given community and to the content they convey (Feldman 1995, 21).

2.3.1 The promises and problems of semiotics

Central to the semiotic tradition, as to the rhetorical tradition, are the ideas of the sign, text and code. A sign has meaning for somebody within some traditions or some context. There is always an intention and a target receiver. As Guiraud (1971) states, “A sign is always marked by an intention of communicating something meaningful” (22). Signs are recognizable because they have structures, which may refer to internal structures or social structures. Thus an important semiotic assumption is that “surface signs are related to an underlying structure” (Feldman 1995).

A text refers to any purposeful assemblage of signs constructed with reference to some rules in order to communicate something. The visual phenomenon of new signage and estate art is taken as a visual text, a grouping of art and design objects constructed with the intent to communicate a sense of cultural sustainability for residents. The code is the rules for the use of the signs, the way meanings get interpreted. Earlier, I referred the rhetorical act of styling as encoding in which the designer makes use of existing codes, or culturally specific values, in the production of new codes that take the form of design. The goal is to appeal to and sometimes even to violate the values of the particular culture.

In this sense, codes control and regulate the favored styles of the culture. Visual form is the instantiation of the code. Codes govern the arrangement of elements on the side of the designer and determine the interpretive responses on the side of the viewer. Semiotics, then, “serves to decode the innumerable ways we communicate, receive, and interpret meaning,” as Eco suggests.²⁴

A look back to the origins and development of semiotics seemed necessary – it helped me to discover further its appropriateness as well as its limits for the current study. Semiotics arose from the works of Saussure (1857-1913) and Peirce (1839-1914) at the

²⁴ Cited in Tanner, Gervasi & Mizzel, *Out of Chaos*. 1991, 45.

beginning of the 20th century. Saussure's model of the sign is made up of the signifier and the signified, whose interaction results in meaning, or signification. For Saussure the sign was essentially a linguistic sign. Concerned only with words, he did not discuss the part played by the reader (Crow 2003). The structuralist emphasis on abstract linguistic sign systems was criticized for being limited in terms of addressing concrete aspects of everyday life. His structure is internal, as Crow notes, Saussure was not concerned with the relationship between the signified and reality. Saussure's semiotics is what I refer to as traditional semiotics.

On the other hand, Peircian semiotics relates to the general articulation of signification and culture (Gottdiener 1995). At different times, Peirce, Barthes, Eco, Krampen (1983), and others, expand on Saussure's linguistic semiotics – the “rigid dictionary approach to signs” (Keefer 1998) – to encompass other media as a sign systems – since “Everything is a sign” (Peirce in Brummet 1995). Eco (1976) mapped contemporary research areas that may encounter semiotic phenomena, including zoosemiotics, medical semiotics, musical codes, as well as visual communication; whereas, Krampen applied semiotics within the context of road sign systems.

Barthes' early work on myth exerted an influence on his theory of semiotics. Both myth and semiotics seem to hold promise for the study of contemporary visual phenomenon. For Barthes, “myth is system of signification . . . a message”, so is a semiotic phenomenon; meanings of both are conveyed by a discourse. The cultural theorist examined in *Mythologies* (1957) a wide range of cultural phenomena as myths, from toy, car, fashion, music, and food to visual image. Perhaps specific to his time, he took a critical stance to see such phenomena as manifesting middle class ideology by the meanings attached to the phenomena. In his semiotic analysis of sign systems, for example, he deconstructed an advertising visual image (e.g. in “rhetoric of the image” 1977) to show that its design has carefully been constructed to become myth.

However, limitations are observed in Barthes' concept of myth and his approach to semiotics. While myth is "the embodiment of a belief in a form that subtly hints at its ideological content through its signification" (Harvey 1982, 139), one common association of myth is that of deception or distortion. Harvey also suggests that Barthes' semiotics is "at once didactic and judgmental" (ibid., 126) due to its lack of precise methodology to arrive at an evaluation of a cultural phenomenon. Such problems limit the application of traditional semiotics to researching the positive aspects of visual design.

2.3.2 The limits of semiotics for design

Visual design is an important signification practice in contemporary culture. The point is supported by Eco, who says, "In culture, every entity can become a semiotic phenomenon. The laws of signification are the laws of culture . . ." (1976, 28). I embrace the semiotics of Peirce and Eco that have inspired Gottdiener's social semiotics. While the latter is most relevant to understanding the signification of visual design in the housing context, the basic concepts of traditional semiotics remain fundamental to the study.

Over the years, there have been discussions on the application of semiotic theory to design (e.g. Kinross 1986; Vihma 1990; Burdek 2005). Some appreciate its applicability to the study of almost everything in terms of uncovering meanings. There are criticisms that have been made of semiotics as well: for example, being self-referential and that it "simply attempts to examine the formal elements within a text" (Slater 1997, 141); being too conceptual, and too arbitrary in its formation of meaning. "The tools it offers are merely conceptions of the dynamics of systems . . . Semiotics is therefore more likely to remain a frame of thought . . ." (Vakeva 1990). Even scholars in human-computer interaction (HCI) attempt to apply semiotics to their field, but as Andersen (2000) states, "the purely analytic character of traditional

semiotics has to be supplemented by a constructive one.”²⁵

Overlooking the reality and the social and material rhetorical context in which communication takes place appears to be the major weakness of traditional semiotics. Accordingly, Friske (1982) argues that semiotics is disconnected from reality, being too theoretical and too speculative. But because it is theoretically attractive, its basic concepts and possible application to some research areas seem promising. In actuality, the fact that semiotics is not socially dependent but culturally arbitrary, limits its application to design. Considered, for example, from a traditional semiotic perspective, the meanings of environmental objects in housing would rely solely on established rules and customs, which is not the case as meaning is also determined by external and rhetorical forces from society. Such are the limits in applying semiotic analysis to contemporary design, which is socially produced.

For this reason, I resorted to the strategy of socio-semiotics, a variant of semiotics as explicated by Gottdiener (1995). It offers an analytical framework that goes beyond traditional semiotics to emphasize the role of materiality in the meaning-making process, while taking into account its social context. The strategy is elaborated in chapter 6.

Semiotics uncovers cultural meanings but it does not show how meanings affect human experience and perception. This is another limit of the tradition. Vakeva (1990), in the *1989 Symposium on Design Research and Semantics*, identified the inadequacy of semiotics for substantial design research. She proposes that semiotics could be supported by phenomenology, a method that focuses on the perceiving subject's consciousness (g7). As a matter of fact, the use of semiotic decoding together with phenomenological analysis in a previous study of memorials is mentioned in Emmison and Smith (2000). Considering my inquiry of residents' encounter with environmental objects as being a “lifeworld” experience,

²⁵ Peter Bogh Andersen, “What semiotics can and cannot do for HCI,” in *CHI '2000 Workshop on semiotic approach to user interface design*, 2000.

the phenomenological approach provides some relevance. Therefore, I incorporated phenomenology to explore the human dimensions of visual communication.

2.4 Phenomenology

What differentiates semiotics from phenomenology is that the former takes signification as its primary focus, while the latter is devoted to attention to understanding experience and perception. Both traditions were pertinent to my study in that they address the signification of visuals and viewing experience of people in the context for study. I argue that the recognition of a sense of cultural sustainability, though highly conditioned by the rhetoric of visual design and semiotic meanings, ultimately is grounded in the lived experience of residents. Nothing can speak of the meaning of experience “other than an anthropological or human justification” (Edie 1973, 539). Fox (1994), speaking from the perspective of image studies, also comments that the most important kind of meaning is constructed from people’s personal interactions with visual images. For this, I take phenomenology as the third constituent of the integrated framework.

2.4.1 Understanding lived experience

Understanding the lived experience marks phenomenology as a philosophy as well as a research strategy (Creswell 2003). In using the term, I refer to both – a philosophy that seeks to define the essence of the objects of our perceptions and a research strategy that attempts to reach the meaning of the lifeworld. The methodological procedure of phenomenology is delineated in chapter 7; this section concentrates on discussing it as a philosophical tradition.

There are various schools of thought on this tradition (Patton 2002, Lindlof 1995): transcendental – Husserl (1859-1938), the German philosopher, regarded as the founder of modern phenomenology; existential – Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961); social – Schutz (1899-1959); hermeneutic – Heidegger (1889-1976). In the current time, van Manen (1997) integrates Husserlian description-based praxis with the Heideggerian interpretation-based tradition into a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology. Lanigan’s (1982, 1988) semiotic phenomenology is a critical integration of structuralist and phenomenological traditions, originating in the discipline of speech communication.

To understand housing residents’ experiences of name signs and public art in their visual environment, this dissertation integrated selected elements of phenomenology as explicated by Van Manen, Moustakas, and Lanigan. I also point out the historical lineage of their thoughts and of mine that is found in the works of Husserl. Below are some key concepts common to these branches of phenomenology that are adopted here.

Inter-subjectivity. Phenomenology emphasizes the importance of the inter-subjective in connection with the perception of objects (Moustakas 1994). Since every perception of appearance varies with the perceiving individual’s background, one’s experience is an incomplete account of an object. Synthesis of multiple perceptions leads to an understanding of inter-subjective experience. Such are the essential features, or essences, of experience.

Based on the notion of inter-subjectivity, I see Housing as an inter-subjective world. Name signs and public art exist for every resident, as for visitors. One experiences the visuals according to one’s senses, however, his or her perception would not be a totally private formation but a result of “copresence” or “coexistence” with other residents.

Essence. Essences, as Husserl (1931 in Moustakas 1994) employs this concept, means that which is common or universal, the condition or quality without which a thing would not be what it is. Applying the concept to my inquiry, there exist two types of essences

in residents' shared visual experience: (1) phenomenological themes essential to the experience, (2) interpretive positions, or experiential conditions grounding such experience. Respectively, they refer to rich, lived experiences that have relevance to ideas of cultural sustainability (the total experience), and residents' mental positions or interpretive positions leading to such interpretations.

Intentionality. Intentionality in phenomenology refers to the internal experience of being conscious of something. The term intention indicates the orientation of the mind to its object, that is, the object exists in the mind in an intentional way (Moustakas 1994). With reference to perception, the perception of something is an intentional act to judge a matter, to evaluate a value, to wish for something wishes (Husserl 1931 in Moustakas 1994). Thus in order to perceive a sense of cultural sustainability, residents must believe in the idea; the resident's mind must be directed to some sort of yearning for feelings and experiences somewhat resemble attributes of cultural sustainability.

Lifeworld. The world of immediate experience; constituted by the thoughts and acts of individuals and the social expressions of those thoughts. The lifeworld is an inter-subjective world of human experience.

Lived experience. The experience as we live through it. It comes from the everyday world as it is lived, felt, undergone and made sense of, as opposed to secondhand experience (Van Manen 1997). To understand experience, each experience must be described, explicated, and interpreted. I got to know the lived experience of residents engaging with the visual phenomenon through interviews; I questioned and residents described and articulated the meanings of phenomenon. Lived experience entails lived meaning.

Lived meaning. Lived meaning refers to the way that we understand our experience as meaningful, by living through it. It is aspect of a situation as experienced by a person in it even though he or she is not explicitly aware of such meanings (ibid.). For my participants, not until they were asked to describe their experience did they begin to

intellectualize and express their lived meanings. Human-oriented lived meaning together with the design-oriented cultural meaning of visuals makes up perception of cultural sustainability.

2.4.2 Phenomenology and the visual

Perception. The most basic philosophical assumption of phenomenology is that we can only know what we experience by attending to perceptions and meanings (Husserl 1913 in Patton 2002). Two types of *perception* are encompassed in this sense: external perception – the ability to see something (such as physical objects) through the visual sense; and internal perception – a state of becoming aware of something (such as the recognition of some ideas) as a mental impression. By assuming a relationship between external perception and internal perceptions, phenomenology distinguishes objective reality and subjective reality. The objective is what appears; its meanings can be recognized only subjectively by the person who experiencing and interpreting it.

Sensation. Of particular importance in phenomenology is the emphasis on appearance, the way that something looks; that which is visually accessible. Husserl believes that all our understanding initially comes from the sensory experience of phenomenon. For Heidegger, a phenomenon means “to bring to light, to show itself, the totality of what lies before us in the light of the day” (1977 in Moustakas 1994, 26). It is further emphasized, “What is given in our perception of a thing is its appearance . . . that which appears provides the impetus for experience and for generating new knowledge” (ibid.).

Since all of our understanding initially comes from sensory experience of phenomena, perception of all objects also comes from sensation. Despite this, Moustakas asserts, perception does not always accurately tell what appears because it involves judging (of a certain matter); valuating (of a value); wish (for the content wishes) that are embedded

with meanings. In this sense, meaning is at the heart of “perceiving, feeling, thinking, remembering, or judging . . .” (ibid., 69) about something whether actually existing or not. My research explored resident meanings of experience that arise from engagement with visual phenomenon. Ultimately, it sought to understand shared meanings and how they came about – phenomenology arrives at the essences of meanings through integrating individuals’ experience, which is the result of inter-subjectivity.

The focus of phenomenology on visual appearance captures my attention as a visual designer. My research sought to understand residents’ perception of environmental objects external to them; however, it is their subsequent internal perception of cultural sustainability (an inner object) arising from their feelings, and meanings of lived experience of visuals that was the ultimate focus of study.

2.5 The rhetoric-semiotics-phenomenology (RSP) framework

This chapter presents a condensed review of rhetoric, semiotics and phenomenology. It draws theories from these intellectual traditions to construct an integrated framework, providing the philosophical underpinnings for visual communication research. Though they emerge as three different initiatives in communication theory, they are intricately related and complementary, compensating for each other’s limitations.

For example, the dominant theory of phenomenology contributes to a hermeneutic understanding of human intentional experience. It is specific about sensation and appearance, but it does not directly deal with the visual quality of appearance, which after all, does affect experience. As Moustakas (1994) observes, phenomenology fails to address the “hylectic character” of experience that has to do with “the features of objects such as their colors and shapes” (56). To make up for this inefficacy, rhetoric and semiotics offer conceptual and analytic tools to approach the design and meaning of visual objects which phenomenology

overlooks. And when rhetoric and semiotics fall short of looking into the lived experience or the inner perception of people, these issues are well addressed by phenomenology.

In fact, the theories have been used, albeit separately in current research; integrated, they offer stronger theoretical insights and sound methodological models than a single theory since they cover all elements of visual communication. Given the lack of agreed-upon models available, this theoretical structure built anew from communication theory is constructive to visual research in general, and appropriate to my inquiry in particular.

The RSP framework is meant for use in qualitative research²⁶ since all its component theories are qualitative approaches in the interpretive practice (Patton 2002; Crotty 1998; Littlejohn 1989). Their assumptions and methods can fully address the characteristics and subject matter of qualitative research – “a focus on language and communication” [by rhetoric and semiotics], “a focus on society and culture” [by semiotics], and “a focus on individual lived experience” [by phenomenology] (Marshall & Rossman 1999).

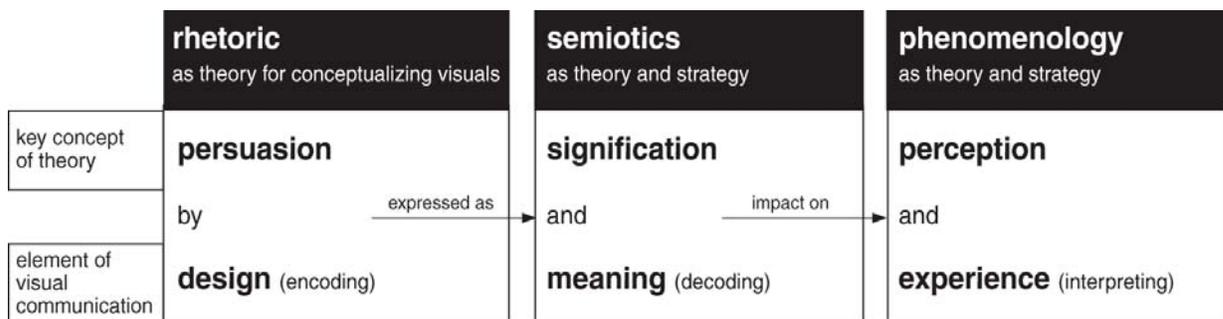


Figure 2.2
Key concepts of the RSP framework in relation to elements of visual communication.

²⁶ The ideas that “semiotics, phenomenology and hermeneutics are the central fields of knowing for design,” that it is a “decision rather than a conclusion,” begins to gain attention in design research community (*Design Research News*, October 2005)

From rhetoric I draw the key concept of persuasion, from semiotics signification and from phenomenology perception. Each is connected one particular element – design, meaning and experience – each is an integral part of the visual communication process (see figure 2.2). The application of the RSP framework to studying visual communication has the following advantages: it helps to comprehend how persuasion is attempted by design through the encoding intended meaning; how meaning is decoded in culture for its signification (cultural meaning), and how perception emerges from interpretation in different viewing experiences (lived meaning). Both types of meanings should contribute to shaping residents’ impressions of a culturally sustainable community to which they belong. Table 2.3 lists other features of the network of theories comprising the theoretical framework.

Table 2.3
Key features of the communication theories that comprise the RSP framework.

rhetoric	semiotics	phenomenology
persuasion	signification	perception
exigence	materiality (socio-semiotics)	sensation
intention	intention	intentionality
sign	sign	intersubjectivity
code	code	lived experience
text	text	lived meaning
enargeia (vivacity)	social context (socio-semiotics)	essence
eudaimonia (wellbeing)	expression	phenomenon

Reviewing literature

My research problem, which links visual communication to cultural sustainability, is unprecedented. A search of literature finds no previous works that have made such a connection, let alone provided systematic research on the topic. This lacuna has not been a surprise. As mentioned in the overview, sustainability communication, a major challenge in societies, is currently receiving attention and appears to be a growing field of action and study. And yet at present, only disparate discourse is available. Communication experts, designers, and sustainability scholars are just beginning to develop sources of reference, basic concepts and theoretical considerations for dedication to the knowledge base of sustainability communication.²⁷ This is precisely the knowledge deficiency to which this dissertation is responding.

To join these efforts, I devoted the previous chapter to reviewing theoretical literature in order to establish the philosophical underpinnings of visual communication in its human context. Given the lack of previous studies on similar topic, it is essential that I justify my choice of the research topic. This chapter goes on to review and clarify terms, concepts relevant to the areas of visual communication and cultural sustainability.

²⁷ Examples of these efforts can be found in Futerra & UNEP 2005; Signitzer & Prexl, Corporate sustainability communication: Aspects of theory and professionalism, paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association, retrieved 10/05/06 from www.allacademic.com/meta/p91193; and see the call for subscription to "Handbook of sustainability communication," retrieved 11/24/06 from www.projekte.org/handbook/rationale

Literature that shaped my ideas in this chapter include work from the fields of visual culture, social theory, communication studies, art and design, cultural studies, environmental aesthetics, housing studies and sustainability research. Visual culture studies hold that all visual artifacts have cultural significance; that they are central to the cultural construction of social life²⁸ – assumptions primary to this inquiry. Visual culture studies of painting, sculpture, design and architecture as objects of investigation also supports my choice of signs and public art as units of analysis.

The body of knowledge contributing to this research inquiry are structured as a literature map (figure 3.1) to include theoretical literature (presented in chapter 2), methodological literature (see chapters 6 and 7), as well as topical literature, which is organized under the two categories of visual communication and cultural sustainability.

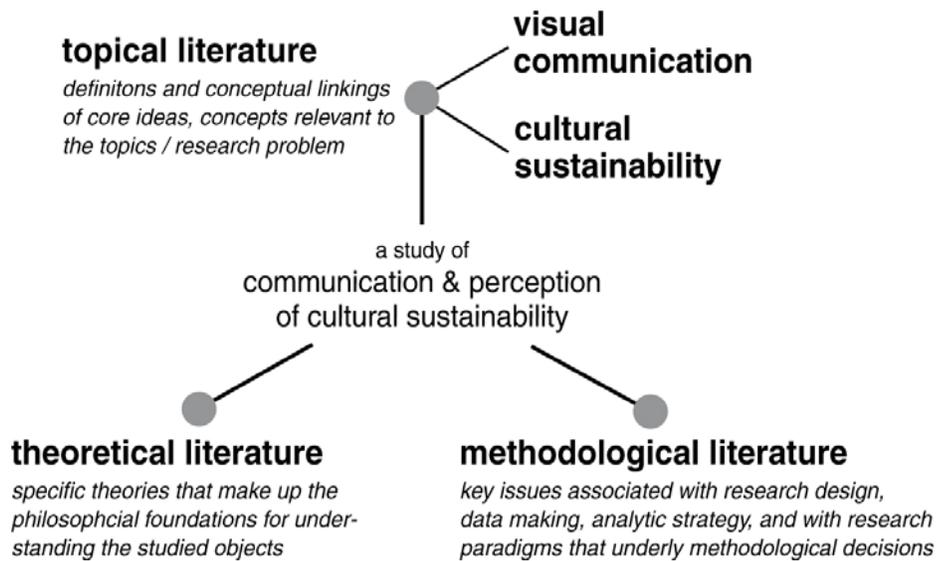


Figure 3.1
Body of knowledge contributing to the inquiry.

²⁸ The idea is argued and established by a number of scholars (e.g. Gombrich 1982, Ball 1992, Barnard 1998).

3.1 Visual communication

I mentioned visual communication at different times as a professional discipline, a mode of communication, or the process and product of communication by visual means (Moriarty & Barbatsis 2005).

As a discipline, visual communication subsumes, for example, the fields of information design, graphic design, interactive design and the visual arts. The discipline also includes branches of communication and media studies whose focus of interest lies in the sequence and motion of aspects of images and text. As a mode, it involves all communication through the visual media. Objects of art and design such as utility-based public signage, and aesthetic-based public art sculptures are examples of products that involve the process of visual communication.

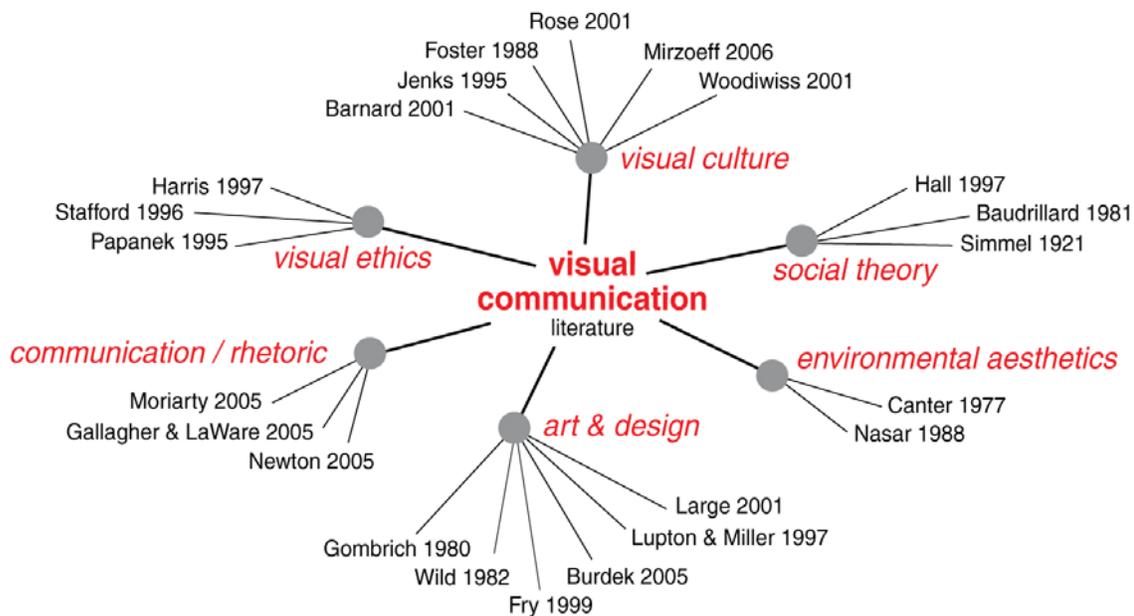


Figure 3.2
Main sources from literature that address visual communication.

The position taken in this dissertation is that the basic condition of communication is that a “sign” is shared, an assumption that guides the overall study. The literature search on relevant materials about visual communication therefore follows this line of thought in its development. A citation map of the main sources from literature is presented in figure 3.2. It includes sources not mentioned in this section, but that are cited elsewhere in the dissertation for shaping the argument on the cultural function of visual communication. This section begins by clarifying the definitions of some visual-related terms.

3.1.1 Vision, visuality and the visual

Vision generally is understood as what the human eye is physiologically capable of seeing. It is a physical operation and a natural faculty. In this regard, vision can be said is a relatively naïve experience, yet it is from this sensation that one is able to develop an experience of the world. The social world is a seen world available to most of its participants via the medium of vision. Social theorists and art historians recognize that what we see, and the manner in which we come to see, is not simply part of a natural ability. “There is only a social not formal relation between vision and truth,” says Jenks (1995).

The consideration of vision in culture as a social and cultural process gives rise to a theoretical term “visuality” to mean the ways of seeing that precede vision. (e.g. Jenks 1995; Foster 1988 in Rose 2001; Woodiwiss 2001; Mirzoeff 2006). In particular, it refers to ways in which vision is constructed: how we see, how we are able, allowed, or made to see (Foster 1988 in Rose 2001) – activities that accompany vision. On the ways of seeing, Foster (1988) notes, “it is rather intimately linked with the ways that our society has, over time, arranged its forms of knowledge, its strategies of power and its systems of desire;” while Woodiwiss (2001) writes, “it is much affected by the positions in time, space and social life from which we look – in this case, the visualities which we inhabit – as any other activity” (2).

Visuality is used in this dissertation in two related ways: first, to denote the visible character of design phenomenon that is value-laden; second, to refer to some sort of visual activity that is value-laden too. Just like any social activity, visuality is loaded with values, historically referenced, culturally constructed and supported; it is visuality that makes up our perception of objects in our everyday life. I define it as the value-laden visible character of a design object and the related visual activity that is characterized by a socially constructed way of seeing. It is influenced by one's position in time, space, and the social life from which he looks.

The term *the visual* typically refers to the process of seeing or 'external something that can be seen by the eyes' (Newton 2005, 26). In visual culture, the visual is taken to mean items of culture "whose visual appearance is an important feature of their being or their purpose" (Jenks 1995, 16). It describes things that are primarily created with the intention that their appearances are the main features especially in the construction of meaning (Barnard 1998). While the visual may be thought of as 'everything that can be seen' in the broadest sense, a design research / qualitative communication study is more interested in the visual which is a product of design, of purposive action. So by "the visual," I mean "anything visual produced, interpreted or created by humans which has, or is given, functional, communicative and/or aesthetic intent" (Barnard 1998, 18).

While the visual can be used interchangeably with visual object, visual artifacts, environmental visual object, design object, or appearance – being created primarily to be seen, to have functional intention (such as name signs) and aesthetic intention (such as sculptures). But in this dissertation, I will refer the name signs and public art in a specific way as "the visual objects," and in general discussion I may use "the visual," I refrain from using "the image" because the visual artifacts that are the studied interest of this dissertation maintain some three-dimensional characteristics while "the image" is usually accepted as a two-dimensional, graphic surface.

3.1.2 Visual environment and visual objects

Boyce (1976) speaks of the constitution of a “total visual environment” in which visual objects and visual attributes, respectively the tangible objects and their intangible concepts, are integrated and grasped by our sight. Design objects, when they reside in a physical environment, become the visual attributes of the environment.

Environment-behavioral studies define visual attributes as the cognitive interpretation of the features and properties of a designed space (Gabr 1993). Thus attributes refer to formal as well as conceptual elements. In residential settings, the design objects of architectural forms, housing blocks, building shape, monuments, signs and graphics, landscape, as well as their spaciousness, and complexity, are visual attributes that characterize the setting.

The residential settings in Hong Kong public housing comprise such visual environments. The residential name signs and public art sculptures included within the environment are the “environmental visual objects.” Understood in the sense of Canter (1977), these objects provide vital functions in urban lives – that of being constituents of places. Canter advances the notion of “sense of place” – when human concepts and activities interact with the physicality of an environment, wherein visual objects play a significant role.

Thus, I conceive of environmental visual objects, not only as urban or architectural objects, but also as cultural and communicative objects. An environmental sign is cultural because “we have constituted it as a meaningful object” (Du Gay & Hall 1997). The connection to culture and society brings the status of the physical object to other levels. For Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton (1989), an object can be a sign, a quality, a physical thing, or an idea (14). Leeds-Hurwitz (1993) notes that objects are the most varied and numerous of the social codes. In the perspective of psychoanalysis, objects stimulate us in at least 6 ways: sensationally, structurally, conceptually, symbolically, mnemonically, and projectively (Bollas 1992). The object is nevertheless the “evocative object” as they bring to mind latent concepts.

In particular, I adopt Baudrillard's (1981) conceptualization, "the object is not a thing, nor even a category; it is a status of meaning" (185). In his view (and Miller's 1987), the object is distinguishable from the product²⁹ and commodity in the sense that the object is a sign, has its signification.

It is from this semiotic view of the object that I hypothesized the role of environmental objects in Hong Kong PRH estates as visual resources for the expression and communication of cultural sustainability. These objects get their topics or design themes from the socio-cultural environment in which they originate and for which they are produced. The hypothesis was also built on the premise that the making and viewing of visual objects is fundamentally a "culture-based practice, just as is writing and reading" (Kenny and Scott 2003). The following section reviews what literature has said about values of the visual in culture and society.

3.1.3 Values of the visual from functional to cultural

Values are enduring beliefs about what is important that transcend specific objects and situations. An initial review of design literature on the values implicit in the visual aspects of graphic, industrial, or architectural design reveals a general concentration on the functionality – it is the utilitarian value that is emphasized. This tendency owes much to a long Modernist tradition in the field – the embracing of functionalism, of "finding effective ways to solve problems for the user" (Schriver 1988). For example, the value of signage, as a form of visual information design, traditionally has been the efficient and effective transmission of a message or declarative information; in other words, clarity, legibility and accuracy. Its advocates include Mijksenaar (1997); Tufte (1990); Zwaga & Boersama (1999).

²⁹ For Miller (1987), a "product" as a result of mass production is identical to all other items produced by the same meaning process, whereas "objects" are unique, intended to signify some particular concepts, such as in art making.

For the functionalists, it is logical that their preference for value in visual objects goes first to the Modernist principles, best summarized in Sullivan's (1896) "form follows function," or the Bauhaus' (1919-1932) "durability and utility equals delight."

Being a public information designer for most of my career, I put high value on the functionality of visual objects. I believe that assessing visual function by utilitarian criteria should remain important in visual design. But a predominance of this model is problematic, for design objects and art objects are indeed ingenuous reflections of the cultural values held by its people (Hawkes 2001). Evaluating the formal design of visual objects by their functional or aesthetic criteria may not reveal the cultural implications they have for people.

Visual objects, apart from carrying clear messages, are outward signs and symbols of particular ideas in the mind.³⁰ Thinking about their visual functions in a cultural sense is unequivocally important, especially for the reason Ball & Smith (1992) state – visual objects in the environment impact on our assessment of a place, of self, of other and on our conduct of daily life. Visual objects have a variety of belief and expectations about the nature and workings of the world associated with them.

Consistent with this view, I presume the two types of visual objects – name signs and public art – offer views of the world through the cultural values embodied during their design process; they render the world in visual terms. And yet, "the rendering is never innocent . . . visuals are never transparent windows to the world, they interpret the world", notes Rose (1992, 6). Such interpretation made by the designers (encoding) is yet again reinterpreted, or decoded, by residents.

3.1.4 Signage and public art

Signage is a form of environmental visual object, a system of signs used for

³⁰ Pitt-Rivers 1875 cited in Schlereth 1985.

communication in a shared environment, usually in the public sphere. The primary role of signage is to identify and orient in the environment – this represents the early inclusive view of many signage designers including Paul Arthur. From the 1950s to the 1990s Arthur’s main concern for sign design has been accessibility (Large 2001). Since then, design was increasingly seen as improving the quality of people’s lives by making information easier to find, understand, and use.

More recently, the conceptualization of function in the practice of signage design has broadened from the formalist concerns of modernism – legibility and readability. The trend has been toward a user-centered approach, which recognizes the significance of context, including the cultural, technological, and psychological dimensions that are required to meet the needs of users. The growing sense of design’s social mission and cultural responsibility has contributed to the maturing of this practice.

But as Sharrock & Anderson (1979) assert, it is impossible to study signage – one can only study the reading of signs, not the sign itself. Studying signage is really the study of what people do with signage. Extensive research was conducted along this line of inquiry, yet the emphasis is frequently on graphic aspects, like the effectiveness of various letter sizes in directory signs. Large (2001) reports a typical research on signage systems, “[signs] were tested in the laboratory . . . then tested in situ . . . Testing included recognition, legibility, and acceptability . . . among respondents drawn from a wide range of demographic groups” (88).

Just as Arthur who moved from a concept of “good design”, derived from a limited view of functionality to performance-based criteria, rooted in how people perceive and process information. Other signage designers go beyond the cognitive dimensions, beyond signage as a wayfinding system, to its semantic dimensions, which involve the viewer in establishing associative meanings between signage as a “sign,” what it stands for , and what it invites (see Jesus 1994). The latter dimension treats signage as cultural artifact that can afford social meaning, “loaded with connotation and stylistic mannerism” (Lupton & Miller 1997).

Graphic designer Peji (2004) comments on cultural influences on urban signage; “form follows culture,” he says, thus suggesting that urban redevelopment start with the revitalization of community identity. A useful visual means is signage. Signs and graphics are “semi-fixed” features (Rapoport 2000) that integrate with “fixed” elements to constitute our visual environment. Being “semi-fixed”, their designs are subject to change on cultural demand. Considered in the context of my study, residential signs communicate identity and cultural meanings that function beyond wayfinding.

Public art is another kind of environmental visual object. It takes on different forms such as sculpture and outdoor murals. Sculpture, for example, can be used by an artist to express his or her own experience or emotion. In contrast or in addition to this focus on the artist is the use of sculpture as cultural expression for a community. From a semiotic perspective, Danesi (1994) suggests that sculpture is art text constructed in the visual mode meant for evoking feelings and sensations – those of the viewers. In this view, sculptures as signs, portray objects in real life or represent abstract ideas by which the artist expresses and evokes, instead, the audience’s experience, ideals, dreams and aspirations in the physical environment.

This seems to reflect the state of the visual phenomenon in Hong Kong PRH estates. Certainly, the commission of artists/designers to create public art sculpture is commonplace these days in places other than Hong Kong. Thus, public art, as a genre of visual communication, is becoming understood and developing as more design-oriented, containing socially sustained and culturally referenced meanings. This is not a new perception. Gombrich (1963), decades ago, supposed the cultural significance of visual metaphors in art and visual forms; he conceived of their meanings as requiring a cultural context for interpretation.

Krauss (1983) suggests, sculpture is “a historically bounded category and not a universal one” (33). In a recent study, Gallagher & Ma (2005), speaking from the traditions

of rhetoric and visual design, point out too that “the values of public art are not universal but local – they are, in other words, historically contingent,” hence, culture-related. LaWare & Gallagher (2007) further argue, “Public art in urban spaces may contribute to discourses of public identity, providing a space of attention, a space to pause and reflect, a space of public engagement.” The possibility of public art sculptures as visual resources for people to relate to ideas of cultural sustainability is, therefore, motivated by their roles as visual expressions of cultural values in the physical space. How cultural sustainability may visually manifest itself is explored in the following section.

3.2 Cultural sustainability

Culture is the pre-condition conducive to the success of other strands of sustainability.

(Chiu 2004)

The integration of culture with issues of sustainability is a relatively recent occurrence. Mudacumura (2002) defines cultural sustainability in the context of public administration as: “The genuine way in which a community of people acknowledges their complex shared values, beliefs, customs, and skills, and determines to preserve the cultural practices that underpin the community members’ synergetic relationship for the sake of maintaining human dignity, while promoting global solidarity” (370).

But how could such a complex theoretical construct manifest itself in forms that are accessible to the public? The question remains largely unstudied. A search of literature shows that no systematic research has been done on this particular issue. In recognition of this, the following section reviews the limited literature on the origin and evolution of cultural sustainability. It also borrows from other relevant literature such as visual research and cultural studies, beginning with the definition of culture adopted in the dissertation. I also

present the sources for advancing my argument on cultural sustainability in relation to the visual (figure 3.3).

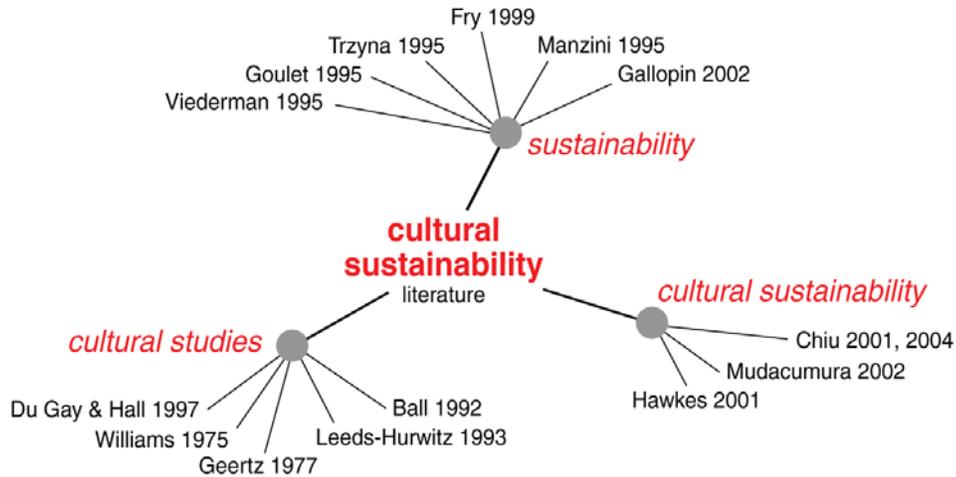


Figure 3.3

Main sources from literature for understanding cultural sustainability in relation to the visual.

3.2.1 Culture, and its visual availability

Williams (1975 cited in Hall 1980) relates culture to the “idea,” the “ideal” and the “ordinary.” This dissertation adopted his view, considering that culture has much to do with ideas through which societies make sense of and reflect on their common experience. I also embrace Williams’ thought that the “ideal” and the “ordinary” are pertinent to culture; that they tend to depict a state of human perfection in ordinary objects created by and for people. In this view, name signs and public art in housing estates constituted a cultural phenomenon that was created through design to reflect and invigorate residents’ ideas and common experience. In particular, the ordinary objects are designed with the intention to mediate residents’ ideals and life aspirations.

Du Gay & Hall (1997) propose the model of a “cultural circuit”³¹ for the study of cultural phenomenon. This model sheds light on my view of the visual phenomenon under study as totally cultural for the following reasons: they constitute “meaningful” entities – “connect with a distinct set of social practices” [encountering public art], are “specific to a particular place” [public housing], are “associated with certain kind of people” [residents], and frequently appear in and are represented in communication media [the public sphere of public housing].

This description addresses the sociological use of the term “culture” – the ways a community of people acknowledge particular values and beliefs that underpin their feelings and behaviors (Hall 1980). I hold that both the ideas and ideals that designers strive to communicate through environmental objects, as well as the residents’ meanings and experiences of them, are evidence of cultural phenomenon.

Also contributing to my perception of culture is Geertz’s (1977) contention that the notion of culture is “essentially a semiotic one”, which leads to the signification aspects of culture. Leeds-Hurwitz (1993) asserts, “Objects signify culture by making concepts and assumptions visible.” In housing estates, what are the assumptions signified by environmental objects? Most likely, they are ideas valued by the residents – aspirations for a better life, desirable social images and identities, the quest for human enjoyment. It is within a semiotically infiltrated culture that environmental visual objects acquire their “sign” status, and become expressions of these cultural meanings.

Clearly, values and beliefs are constituents of culture but we cannot know what a culture’s values are except by observing their manifestations (Hawkes 2001). Cultural performance is a vital manifestation, whereas visual design as a common type of mass media provides ways and platforms for expressing cultural values, as in the design of signs and

³¹ For more, see Du Gay & Hall, *Doing cultural studies: The story of the Sony Walkmans*, 1997.

public art. Possibly these visual forms can communicate cultural meanings through their visibility (see 3.1.1).

Ball (1992), speaking from a research perspective, points out that visibility has to do with the ways a culture is visually available (4). Ball, the visual researcher, conducted a case study of visual materials collected from fieldwork in Himalayan India (1998). He was able to distinguish aspects of Tibetan Buddhist culture from the indigenous Hindu culture, through an analysis and interpretation of cultural arrangements including pictorial and linguistic signs displayed in public space. The article points out culture's visual availability as a resource of visual research, substantiating the connection of the visual to the cultural.

What, then, is the implication of the interdependence of the visual, cultural and visibility for this research? It is my argument that signage and public art in Hong Kong public housing estates illustrate Ball's concept of "visual availability of culture" (131), and that these visual forms also manifest elements of cultural sustainability. I return to this topic later in chapter 10. What follows is a short history of cultural sustainability, beginning with a brief account of the term "sustainability."

3.2.2 A brief historical account

Sustainability is a concept derived from that of "sustainable development" introduced in the 80s and popularized by the Brundtland report, *Our Common Future* (1987). Defined as "a characteristic of a process or state that can be maintained indefinitely,"³² sustainability initially refers to ecological sustainability; when combined with social sustainability and economic sustainability, they constitute the once dominant model: "triple-bottom-line" of the 90s. Later the "four-pillar" model of sustainability was developed

³² *Caring for the earth*, 1991 cited in Trzyna 1995

by incorporating the cultural dimension (Hawkes 2001). More recently, Mudacumura (2002) introduces the “six initial constructs”³³ of sustainability to include two other dimensions – the spiritual and the political.



Figure 3.4
Models of sustainability from “triple-bottom-line,” “four-pillar” to “six initial constructs.”

“Cultural sustainability,” the focus of my research, corresponds to “cultural vitality”. It is known as the “fourth pillar of sustainability” (Hawkes 2001), considered as essential to a healthy and sustainable society as the other three pillars – economic viability, ecological balance and social equity. “Sustainability” and “vitality” are used interchangeably here to refer to the cultural component of sustainability. The dimension of culture was integrated with concepts of sustainability in the last decade when researchers, especially those taking a humanist approach, argued that cultural sustainability is a key dimension of development. They hold that sustainability is “not a technical problem to be solved . . . but a

³³ For more on the “spiritual initial construct” and “political initial construct” of sustainability see Mudacumura, *Towards a general theory of sustainability*, 2002.

set of values to guide our action:”³⁴ it is “ultimately a cultural issue” (Giradet 2001).

Don & Ray (2003 in Chiu 2004) advance a similar idea: not only are there material and technical requirements of sustainability, but there are also cultural prerequisites for their realization. Chiu (2004) stresses, “culture is the pre-condition conducive to the success of other strands of sustainability.”³⁵ The issue undergoes active discussion in disciplines such as public administration and housing research (Hawkes 2001; Mudacumura 2002; Chiu 2001, 2004). In particular, public planning literature advocates a cultural perspective as a basis for successful implementation of the wider issue of sustainability as public policy. It focuses on how cultural forms should develop to express a sense of wellbeing, energy, creativity, diversity and innovation in human societies. Because vitality is at the heart of community development, “cultural vitality” is an appropriate term. Hawkes (2001) conceptualizes it as the manifestation of robust diversity, compassionate inclusivity, energetic creativity, open-minded curiosity and community wellbeing, as well as the existence of tolerance and flexibility. He presents it as one of the basic requirements for facilitating an energetic community, a notion that ought to be taken up or addressed in government policy.

Fostering cultural sustainability is advanced by some cultural policy in city development. Through artistic expression and community activities, cities seek to preserve cultural identity and maintain vibrant local cultures. An example can be found in Austin, Texas: their vision for a culturally vital Austin is “A3D3” – accessible, affordable, applauded, diverse, distinctive and dynamic.³⁶ Mudacumura’s (2002) “cultural sustainability constructs”

³⁴ Viederman cited in Trzyna 1995, 17.

³⁵ As the research community is working toward a consensus of culture being the pre-condition, there are indications; for example, *The International Sustainability Conference* (2006, 2007, 2008) positions the cultural dimension of sustainability before that of economic and social in their publicity program. Whereas the arts and creativity, attributes like belonging and identity, are recognized as resources of the strand of sustainability.

³⁶ www.prosperitystrategies.com

encompass “global solidarity, societal welfare, human dignity, preservation of cultural practices” (370).

With a slightly different focus, housing and architectural studies emphasize the significance of cultural sustainability in terms of their contribution to “sustainable housing.” For such scholars and practitioners, to promote the cultural aspects of sustainability is to identify cultural factors that allow people’s aspirations, goals and values to be expressed and sustained, and to maintain continuity through cultural activities and building forms.

A distinctive feature of this approach, as Chiu (2004) notes, is the preservation of housing heritage. But other visual forms in housing environments are also outcomes of the socio-cultural values, customs and traditions. Thorns (2004) stresses the challenge of moving beyond environmentalism to community concerns as being significant for sustainable housing. The term cultural sustainability rather than cultural vitality, is adopted under these practices.

Chiu’s (2001) attributes of cultural sustainability include identity formation and expression, cultural heritage conservation, and a sense of cultural continuity. Other definitions include reflecting the “way of life” of a people, maintaining collective memory, heightening community distinctiveness, and locating a contemporary society in its traditional context. The concern is continuation of a culture’s norms, customs and lifestyles that promote community wellbeing.

Elsewhere, the cultural dimension infers “identity and self-worth to people . . . beliefs concerning the ultimate meaning of life and history.” And in order to be culturally sustainable, “the foundations of community and symbolic meaning systems must be protected” (Goulet 1995). Among the few design disciplines that start to “think sustainable” in the cultural and visual senses, is landscape design which is perceived as responding to cultural necessity and following cultural aesthetic conventions. Nassauer (1994) expresses the view that visual objects in the built environment or landscape must evoke human enjoyment to claim being culturally sustainable.

3.2.3 Working definitions and existing attributes

Unlike environmental sustainability, for which many researchers have developed measurable indicators, cultural sustainability remains a theoretical construct, an evolving concept at this time. But by integrating these scholars' insights, I introduced a working definition of cultural sustainability: "Evidence of cultural phenomenon associated with the vitality of a community and the continuity of culture that may bring about human wellbeing of the long-range nature for the common good, not for self interest." According to literature, such evidence includes visual forms and human experience of such forms. An "attribute" is defined as the quality, element, or characteristic of the evidence. The cultural sustainability of a community is specified, and qualified by its attributes because the attributes have become attached to the concept.

A synthesis of interpretations from existing sources entails a set of literature-derived attributes of cultural sustainability that uses human experience as the elements: (1) expressing value diversity, (2) articulating community identity, (3) recognizing human dignity, (4) sustaining collective memory, (5) manifesting energetic creativity, (6) preserving cultural heritage, (7) evoking human enjoyment, and (8) enhancing community wellbeing. Such is an outcome of the review – the identification of elements that characterize the evidence of cultural phenomenon. Existing attributes provide a framework and serve as the basis for an interview guide for used in the field research, for eliciting residents' interpretations and experiences of environmental visuals in the research setting

3.3 The visuality of cultural sustainability

Culture is not itself visible, but is made visible only through its representation.

(Van Maanen 1988)

The most important outcome of this integrative review concerns the knowledge it reveals about the significance of the visual mode in manifesting and communicating ideas about sustainability to the public. It shows that cultural sustainability has much to do with the visual, whether in its “visual amenability” or its “visual availability.” Chiu (2001) notices the visible character of cultural sustainability that makes it amenable to visual manifestation, such as visual forms in residential environment or in artistic performance. Ball (1992) emphasizes the “visual availability of culture” in the physical surrounding using the example of outdoor signs. Apparently, the visual is the main platform if sustainability is to be communicated at all, whether environmental or cultural, and is even more crucial when communicating sustainability’s cultural component.

A review of the literature on visual communication and cultural sustainability reveals that research into sustainability communication is lacking, that there is a gap in the literature, though the relevance of the topic as a line of inquiry is generally recognized. Synthesizing insights derived from relevant literature, I propose the notion of “visuality of cultural sustainability,” the capacity for ideas related to cultural sustainability to be embodied in design objects, that visually manifest themselves and be recognized by viewers. This notion thus articulates the visual and social nature of the theoretical construct.

These ideas are intriguing, literature-supported, and appear to make good sense. But systematic research may best establish the viability of the notion, as well as to help our understanding of the role it plays in the communication and perception of culture. In the following chapter, a strong case is made for the study of communicating cultural sustainability by visual means. Indifference to such a knowledge deficiency will likely limit the newer strand of sustainability to develop, thus undermine the advancement of overall sustainable development.

PART II
CONTEXT & RESEARCH QUESTIONS

4

Building a research inquiry

In chapter 2, an integrated theoretical framework of visual communication was constructed, providing sets of assumptions about the visual nature and functions of design, meanings, and experiences in cultural contexts. In chapter 3, the deficiency of literature on sustainability communication represents a knowledge gap, which requires some urgency in addressing its relevance to society. Further, a critical analysis and synthesis of literature on visual communication and cultural sustainability suggests the need for the development of a new construct, namely, *visuality of cultural sustainability*.

How does this construct, which is admittedly abstract, become concretized? How can the knowledge deficiency be addressed? This chapter responds to these questions and deal with the practical purpose of this dissertation – to build a substantiated empirical case to better understand the communication and perception of cultural sustainability by visual means. Hong Kong public housing is the specific context in which I explored my research problem.

4.1 A large public housing sector: the context of study

The analysis of objects in phenomenology [as in socio-semiotics] must always

reflect a particular world and time.³⁷ It is a decade after 1997³⁸ in Hong Kong in some PRH estates, the objects of my analysis, the visual phenomenon of name signs and public art as well as residents' experience with these visual objects that are the basis for my field research.

This section offers some factual background regarding the rise of a large public housing sector in Hong Kong. It introduces a few political, economic and cultural incidents that have direct or indirect impact on the occurrence of the housing phenomenon. Characteristics of the phenomenon are identified; descriptions of the study estates that exemplify such phenomenon are provided. My purpose is to provide a physical backdrop for my research that suggests that a culturally sustainable housing community in Hong Kong is attainable and that this is the case due to the visual phenomenon examined here.

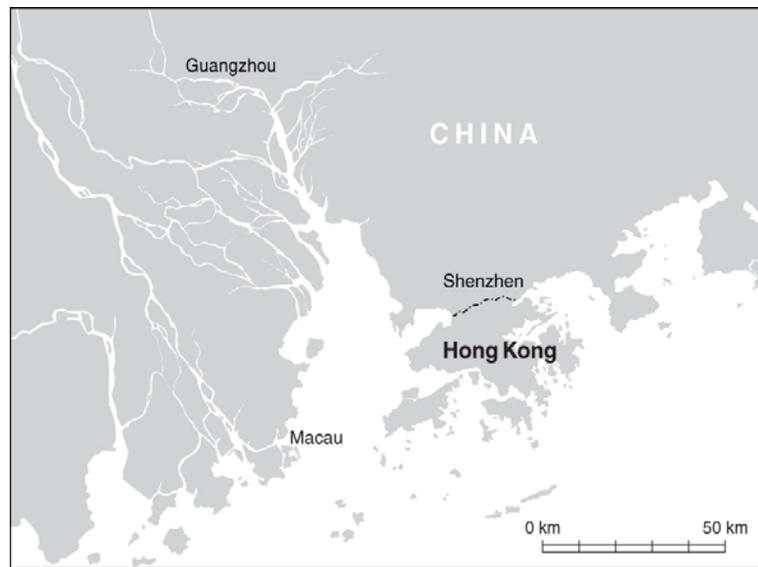


Figure 4.1
Location of Hong Kong.

³⁷ Husserl cited in Burdek 2005.

³⁸ The territory of Hong Kong came under British jurisdiction in 1841 (Pryor, *Housing in Hong Kong*, 1983). It ceased to be a dependent territory of the United Kingdom and became a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of the People's Republic of China on July 1, 1997.

Hong Kong³⁹ is tiny in its physical dimensions (1,104 sq. kilometers, that is, 426 sq. miles) yet vast in its population (6.94 million in mid-2005). By 2004, Hong Kong had produced 381 public housing estates accommodating 3.2 million people in 1,081,571 apartments.⁴⁰ This massive housing program is administered by the Hong Kong Housing Authority; hence the largest landlord in the world.

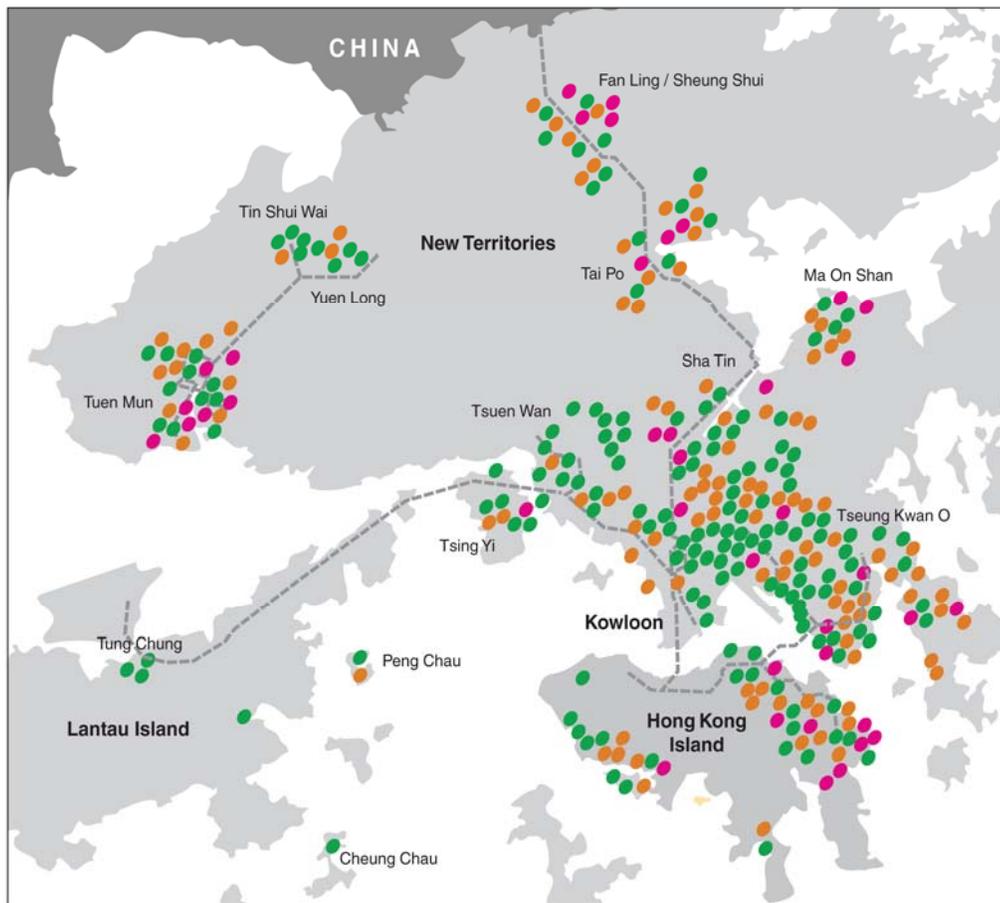


Figure 4.2
Distribution map of public housing estates in Hong Kong.

³⁹ Hong Kong is situated at the south-eastern tip of China. It covers Hong Kong Island, Kowloon peninsula, and the new territories – the more rural section of Hong Kong, including 262 outlying islands, the largest of which is Lantau Island (146 sq kilometers). Retrieved from <http://www.info.gov.hk>.

⁴⁰ *Housing in Figures*, 2004

The Authority began accommodating people in the 1950s. On Christmas eve of 1953, a fire swept through the Shek Kip Mei squatter area in the Kowloon peninsula, leaving 53,000 people homeless. By early 1954, two-story structures were built to house the needy victims. So began the government's public housing program thus started off on a large scale. In 1972, the Governor, Sir Murray MacLehose, announced a ten-year housing program to provide self-contained housing for 1.5 million people.⁴¹ With the initiation of the long-term housing plan, the Hong Kong government continued to pump resources into building more public rental housing.⁴²

In 1997, just around the historical transformation of the political status of Hong Kong, the residential property market was robust. In October, Chief Executive C.H. Tung announced his plan to build 85,000 new public housing flats a year for the lower-income groups. The government housing policies partly precipitated the property market slip in the third quarter of the year. By the fourth quarter, the market had further plunged as a result of Asian financial turmoil⁴³ and high interest rates.

Hong Kong has faced major challenges during the decade after the transfer of sovereignty from Britain to China, however. Among them were an internal housing policy changes and external influences such as the regional economic crisis that have brought about asset devaluation, especially of property. Worse still, a new disease "Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome" (SARS) emerged in Guangdong province, China and reached Hong Kong in February 2003, putting the housing construction industry into a slow growth.

But public housing construction did not stop despite the hard times caused by the economic turmoil and the public health crisis. Housing policy in Hong Kong has always been

⁴¹ *Hong Kong Housing Authority Annual Report 1996-97.*

⁴² See *Housing & social change: East-West perspectives.* 2003.

⁴³ See research paper by Goldstein & Hawkins, *The Origin of the Asian Financial Turmoil*, May 1998; *Hong Kong Annual Report 1999*, or Forrest and Lee, *Housing and social change: East-west perspectives.* 2003.

a social improvement measure that prompts the provision of more homes for the majority low-income population.

4.2 Evolving visual environments

There are many problems associated with the design and planning of public housing. As Craun noted in the 1970s, quite often so much stress is placed on economic feasibility, durability and ease of maintenance that little attention is paid to quality of the visual aspects. Public housing developments thus seem to lack visual appeal. This has been true within other housing contexts, for example in American cities a few decades ago. At that time the aesthetic attractiveness of a dwelling complex did not rank as a primary problem in providing shelter, meeting spatial and utilitarian needs for most low-income families. In recent times, as more functional criteria of interiors have been satisfied, the appearance of public housing and its surrounding environment is becoming more important to residents.

This appears to be the case in Hong Kong. The new millennium saw half the overall population of Hong Kong (around 3.5 million) living in 380 or so “estates.” Despite its “non-elite,” “low-cost” nature, large-scale housing developments have begun to include sophisticated visual environments. Stylized with themepark-like, sometimes lavishly fabricated design features, these housing environments are culturally coded and exhibit contemporary aesthetics. Thus, apparently an evolution of human needs is considered or has brought about modifications in the physical environment.



Figure 4.3
“Mark I” public housing blocks built in the mid-1950s. (Source: Housing in Hong Kong, 1983)



Figure 4.4
“Concord” and “Harmony” public housing blocks built in the 2000s.

To be sure, few PRH residents shared public spaces so bright and colorful in the early years of public housing in Hong Kong. Their memories of older estates are dominated by a monotonous uniformity and institutional look as in Mark I and Mark II blocks. Today, one notices the provision for variations in building design as well as vibrant environmental designs. Non-institutional building exteriors, good landscaping, and variety in façade designs, contribute to a pleasant environment that contrasts with the homogeneous visual appearance of housing constructed in the 1950s or 1960s.

Among traditional environmental improvement measures, such as planting and street furniture, is the placement of stylishly designed and attractive looking objects, namely, architectural signage and public art sculptures. They create a visual dynamic within the environment – what I call the “new signage” and “estate art” phenomenon. In order to understand the lived experience of residents encountering these visual dynamics on a daily basis, it is necessary to conduct field research in the natural setting of the estates in which such visual objects are located; where visual encounters occur. Below, I elaborate on the characteristics of each of the phenomena and describe how I selected estates for this study.

4.2.1 The “new signage” phenomenon

In contrast to the homogeneity of early housing signs, contemporary signage in housing is characterized by its visual diversity – across estates, unique-looking, visually stimulating name signs, wall graphics and entry facades distinguish the “faces” of individual estates. Graphically, there are designs that depict “Chineseness,” adopt an “organic” style by using motifs from nature, or incorporate “machine aesthetics,” for example, through brushed stainless steel lettering. Structurally, some messages appear in the form of plaques, while others are more “architectural” in scale. The old idea of the 50s and 60s, the crude and simple paint markings of numbers or alphabets on walls of housing blocks, has been replaced by modern approaches towards visual diversity.

Earlier estates that display features of “new signage” include Heng On (1987) and Yiu On (1988) in Sha Tin; Ka Fuk (1994) in Tai Po. I have chosen as my study estates some newer developments – Sheung Tak Estate (1999) and Kin Ming Estate (2003) in Seung Kwan O where the signage design has not followed the traditional numbering approach.



Figure 4.5
Typical housing block identification in an estate built in the 1960s.



Figure 4.6
Free-standing signage in a new development.

Sheung Tak Estate was completed in 1999 on the site of Tseung Kwan O Area 59. The site (Site B), which sits on 13 hectares of reclaimed land, consists of 16 “Harmony” blocks for rental and sale, an “Annex Block,” and a “Housing for Senior Citizens Complex.”⁴⁴ According to some housing literature, the application of a color scheme to the estate’s environment design was based on the recommendation of a French color consultant. The harmonious bluish-green and light grey hues of the exterior walls are complemented by brightly color detail. In adding interest to the neighborhood, design is used strategically in the

⁴⁴ *Hong Kong Housing Authority Annual Report 1998-99.*

development and is expected to provide an attractive and pleasant environment for residents.

I preferred these neighborhoods for my study because the vibrant-looking environmental objects manifest the cultural values that I am looking for, and also match the desirable resident profile. For example, the majority of residents in these estates relocated from older estates carry a life-long history of living in public housing. The richness of meanings concerning their past and current experience of housing visual environments can be derived. These residents constitute my “information-rich cases for study in-depth” (Patton).

4.2.2 The “estate art” phenomenon

Another type of environmental object whose social existence and cultural meanings interest me has to do with outdoor public art in housing setting. Introducing art into the living community of public housing is not a recent idea but an old practice in Hong Kong. Since the late 1960s, and the early 1970s, the Resettlement Department⁴⁵ had paid greater attention to improving the environment of the then “new estates.” An “artistic” and economical way of doing this is to paint murals on existing structures or walls of buildings. In 1970, the department had the wall of a housing block in Lam Tin Estate painted with the image of a flying dragon, generally understood as symbolizing the residents, ethnic Chinese, as heirs of the dragon. The wall picture was appealing and overshadowed other neighboring building walls that were bland and dull. Leung (1999) describes tenants’ reaction as, “Being very proud of the painting, the residents came to call Block 15 the ‘Dragon Mansion,’ and it quickly became a landmark in the area” (245).

While most early artworks were painted by artists supposedly for residents, there were instances in which residents themselves participated in the design and painting of

⁴⁵ The Housing Board (an advisory and coordinating body), the Resettlement Department and the former Hong Kong Housing Authority were consolidated in 1973, Leung, 2003, 26.

environmental visuals. In 1998, the Authority held a series of mural-painting activities in eleven estates. Residents and local students, under the guidance of professional painters, sketched with their own hands their impressions of the estates in the past and present, and their aspiration for the future. In Cheung Tsing Estate on Tsing Yi Island, the cross-harbor bridge and container vessels were depicted. The mural at Fu Sin Estate in Tai Po shows a view of the Kwong Fuk Bridge and old Tai Po Market. And in Tin Yiu Estate, residents' sentiment for the modernization of their very own living environment and related infrastructure was portrayed – the Light Rail Transit system, shopping malls and fountains (Leung 1999).

Such is the root of “estate art” phenomenon; seeded as a means of regenerating old estates, the provision of art in housing today appears to be a means of upgrading residential satisfaction, even in newly constructed estates. Increasingly, socio-cultural objectives are bestowed upon designers or artists who are commissioned to design the artworks.⁴⁶ To claim that they are ‘designed’ is to consider the practice as the commodification of art, hence a purposive action, usually covert. For example, a number of site-specific sculptures, as part of the “Public Art in Estates” scheme,⁴⁷ were commissioned in 1999 for installation in Yat Tung Estate I and Estate II in a new town called Tung Chung. These are my study estates.

⁴⁶ Related issues are discussed in Tam, “When things are shaky: Rethinking art and museums as impacted by design” in *Hong Kong visual arts yearbook 2004*.

⁴⁷ “Public Art in Estates” is an art promotion scheme initiated by the Hong Kong Housing Authority.



Figure 4.7

Sculpture in an estate's open space where some elderly women are resting.



Figure 4.8

Sculpture amid busy commuters in an estate in Tung Chung.

Tung Chung is situated on the northern coast of Lantau, a large outlying island west of Hong Kong. In the past, a paddy field and fishing village occupied this land. Back in the 1990s, it underwent development due to the construction of a new international airport. Housing developments in Tung Chung, private and public, helped to relieve the congested living environment in urban areas. The first group of residents moved in the PRH estate in Tung Chung. The new town now accommodates 320,000 residents.⁴⁸

Sculptures in Yat Tung Estate adopt themes that reflect the history and cultural heritage of Tung Chung, new images and the promotion of aspirations of the community. One can find amid the high rise estate buildings, along the covered walkways, in front of the commercial centers, a generous installation of murals or sculptures in the public spaces of the community. The magnitude of environmental displays transforms the streetscape around estates, and thereby, the everyday visual experience of the low-income neighborhood. It

⁴⁸ *Hong Kong Housing Authority Annual Report 1999.*

constitutes a visual phenomenon specific to the Yat Tung neighborhood – the “estate art” phenomenon. As I will demonstrate in later chapters, the sculptures are designed, purportedly, in line with the needs of residents as well as community development. They visually embellish the physical space, culturally acknowledge a different and advanced, fairly well accomplished, era of public housing after its 50 years of development.

Proposition and research questions⁴⁹

With the research context introduced, I will now apply the theoretical tools gained from the RSP framework, and knowledge acquired through literature, to the specific phenomena of name signs and public art in Hong Kong PRH estates. Initially I framed a proposition, in which I summarized my ideas about what might be going on with regard to the meaning of visual design and the experience of residents; specially I described what those experiences mean for residents in terms of shaping their perception of a culturally sustainable housing community.

The proposition is speculative. So I came up with a set of particularizing⁵⁰ research questions to guide my inquiry for a deeper understanding of the specific research problem. These questions also direct the development of interview questions, generating dialog between me and my participants. Finally in this chapter I provide the working definitions of terms used throughout the inquiry before moving on to next chapter, where I present my research methodology for exploring the research questions.

⁴⁹ My research questions are posed in this chapter for I follow Maxwell (1995) who says that the research questions in a qualitative study shouldn't be formulated until the purposes and context of study are clarified.

⁵⁰ Maxwell also makes distinction between generalizing and particularizing questions. The latter way of stating questions is appropriate and legitimate in my research because it seeks to derive description and interpretation from the particular case of Housing.

5.1 Proposition

My proposition is that name signs and public art in the estates in Tseung Kwan O and Tung Chung communicate a sense of cultural sustainability by evoking in residents thoughts and feelings about the vitality of their community and the continuity of Chinese culture. Evidence of such cultural phenomena, hypothetically, is the result of interaction among the persuasive power of design, the signification of visual objects, and the viewing experience of people (visuality) within a socio-cultural context. Also playing a part in the communication and perception of cultural sustainability is the situational condition of public housing and interpretive positions of residents. Methodologically, the whole process can be understood through the approaches of rhetoric, semiotics, and phenomenology. Their conceptual relationship is shown in figure 5.1.

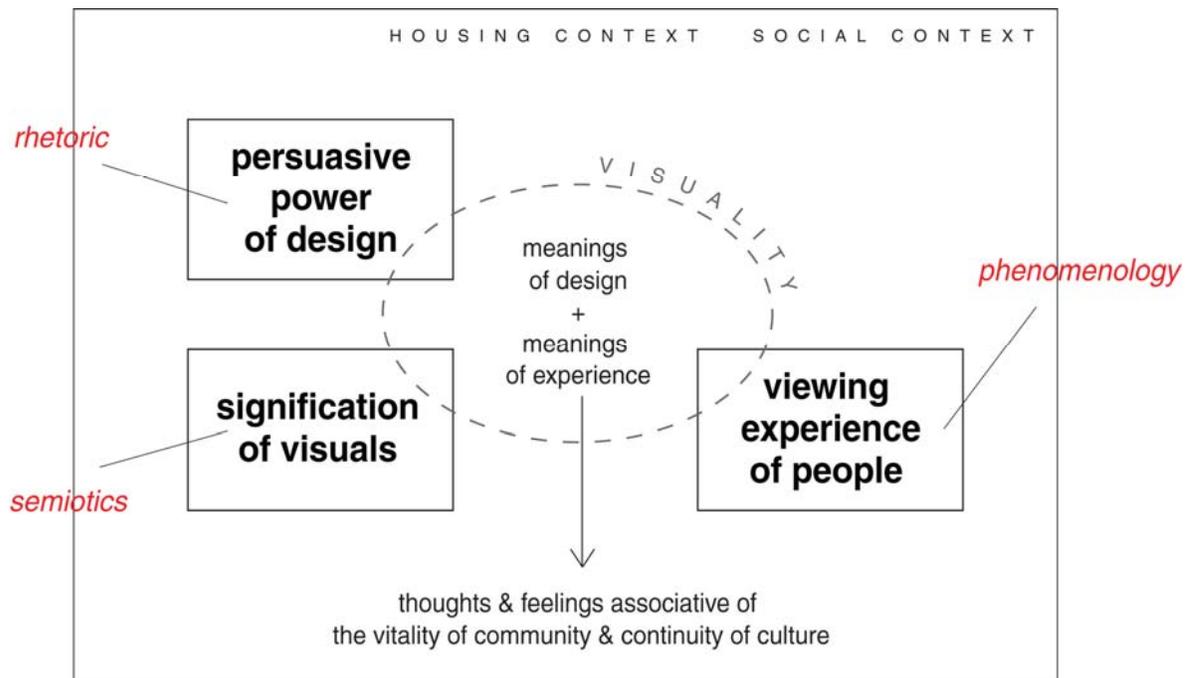


Figure 5.1

Conceptual model of a proposition: the communication and perception of attributes of cultural sustainability

5.2 Research questions

Central research question:

How do the design, meanings, and experiences of the visual phenomenon of “new signage” and “estate art” contribute to the communication and perception of attributes of cultural sustainability for the residents of Hong Kong public housing?

Subsidiary research questions:

1. What is the situational condition of housing estates in which the visuals are experienced and their meanings are identified?
2. What are the cultural meanings signified by the design of estate name signs and public art sculptures?
3. Through what experiences do residents encounter and engage with the visual phenomenon?
4. What is the structure of experience that constitutes their perception of attributes of cultural sustainability in the public housing community?
5. What are the essences, or interpretive positions underlying residents’ shared meanings and experiences that make up the perception?

5.3 Definitions of terms

Visual environment. A physical surrounding in which visual objects and visual attributes, the tangible objects and their intangible concepts, are integrated to grasp the sight and mind of housing residents.

The visual phenomenon. The phenomenon of “new signage” and “estate art,” referring to the entire display of environmental visual objects, namely architectural name signs and public art sculptures, in the study estates in Tung Chung and Tseung Kwan O. The visual phenomenon is a design/cultural phenomenon.

The total phenomenon. The visual display and the impact the visuals have on residents' lived experience that make up their perception of cultural sustainability of their community – a totality of visual phenomenon and human phenomenon.

The total experience. Experience pertinent to the total phenomenon; that which leads to perception of cultural sustainability.

Visuality. The value-laden visible character of design object and the related visual activity which is characterized by a socially constructed way of seeing.

Cultural sustainability. Evidence of cultural phenomena associated with the vitality of community and continuity of culture that may bring about human wellbeing of the long-range nature for common good not self interest.

Visuality of cultural sustainability. The capacity of the ideas about cultural sustainability that are embodied in design objects, that visually manifest themselves and are recognized by viewers.

PART III
PARADIGM & METHODOLOGY

Identifying a research paradigm

Part III describes my research paradigm⁵¹ and justifies the methodology employed to explore the research questions and to illustrate the proposition. But to choose a particular methodology I must first deal with the idea that lies behind the decision of the approach. So I introduce the paradigm embedded in my methodology before turning to the explication of the specific research strategies and research methods.

Love (2001) stresses three important issues with respect to the theoretical and methodological foundations for PhD design research:⁵² first, the exposition of a researcher's theoretical perspective, or research paradigm, as a substantial aspect of a research thesis; second, the involvement of more than one paradigm as appropriate, especially to research areas where researchers are required to address human subject considerations alongside the physical properties of objects posed in different research questions; and third, a single over-arching paradigm (background paradigm) to guide the overall approach to the research problem, in addition to the paradigms associated with individual research questions.

⁵¹ To avoid confusion with 'theoretical framework' which I use to designate the particular network of related theories of rhetoric, semiotics, and phenomenology, I adopt "paradigm" (Denzin & Lincoln 1994) instead of "theoretical perspective" (Crotty 1995) or "system of inquiry" (Wang & Groat 2002) to refer to the worldview, general perspective, the set of beliefs, values a researcher has in the mind when they conduct an inquiry. There is, for example, the objectivist paradigm, or interpretive paradigm, generally used in communication research. This inquiry adopts an interpretive paradigm.

⁵² <http://www.love.com.au/PublicationsTlminisite/2001> accessed October 28 2006 09:48 PM

My dissertation took into consideration Love's model as the basis for writing the foundation for this research inquiry. I identified my over-arching paradigm as interpretivism. I also decided that the research should take two approaches; structural and hermeneutics (Barnard 2001). The former is associated with the design-oriented research questions on the cultural meanings of visual objects, the latter with the people-oriented questions of lived experience engaging with the visual environment.

The following introduces two contrasting research paradigms for visual communication research with brief mention of their possible diverse approaches as applied to the study of sustainability communication. I then explicate the over-arching paradigm chosen for this inquiry.

6.1 Objectivist? Interpretivist?

The qualitative-driven RSP framework reflects my adherence to an interpretive, humanistic approach to research. Such a perspective was not the dominant worldview in communication study until the early 90s (Burdek 2005). In fact, communication has long been viewed in an objectivist way (Lindlof 2002), using, for example, the technical "source-channel-receiver" model of information theory.⁵³ An objectivist claims to provide quantitative measures of meaning which is verifiable; it infers causality from correlation and aims at prediction.

Applying this objectivist model, the role of visuals in communicating sustainability would be deemed to be the mechanical transmission of visual messages in which the literal content of messages directs readers to environmental issues; for example, encouraging the recycling of garbage. Moreover, it would be assumed that the objectivist

⁵³ See more about Shannon & Weaver's 1949 mathematical theory of communication in, for example, Friske, *Introduction to communication studies*, 1982.

approach and quantitative measurement are better ways to predict and shape the content of sustainability communication. This dominant “transmission paradigm” (Heath 2000) emphasizes functionalism and the instrumentality of visual communication.

The objectivist view of communication as “transportation of information” (Storkerson 2001) is widely adopted in academic research. Yet there is another decisive feature of communication. Burdek (2005) maintains that that information is not totally transmitted, but constructed. In his view, “external” information is not transmitted but constructed by people to create many subjective “internal” meanings based upon different interpretations. Hall (1980), recognizing the “crisis” of the dominant paradigm in empirical-behavioral communication research, proposes to theorize communication as what he calls “a cultural field.” As does Lindlof (2002), who states that this is not to negate the dominant objectivist paradigm, but simply to emphasize the interpretative paradigm as another coherent way of studying communication.

Working within an interpretivist paradigm, I consider visual communication a matter of signifying meanings and purposes in visual mode – I want to understand rather than measure meaning. The interpretive paradigm also grounds the rhetorical view of the visual, presuming persuasive, intent, and cultural significance in visual design. In this view, visual artifacts communicate ideas of sustainability, not as a means of information transportation, but as a rhetorical/cultural tool. The interpretivist paradigm emphasizes the human aspects of visual communication.

6.2 Interpretivism as the over-arching paradigm

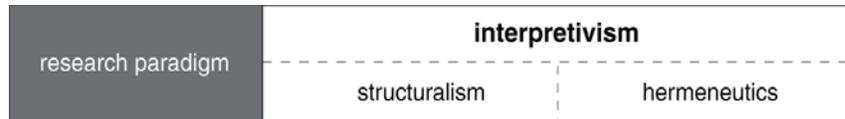


Figure 6.1

An overarching paradigm with its two complementary approaches.

Cultural critic Adorno (1903-1969) asserts that culture is not quantifiable; Hall (1997) points out that understanding culture depends on its participants interpreting meaningfully what is around them. Researching visual communication for its cultural signification and impact on human experience, I identified my dissertation as a qualitative communication inquiry that subscribes to interpretivism. This inquiry, then, is grounded in an interpretivist philosophical position; its concern is how name signs and public art are experienced and interpreted by housing residents in relation to their perceptions of a culturally sustainable housing community.

Interpretivism takes the epistemological position of constructionism, which assumes the construction of meanings by human beings as they engage with the world (Crotty 1995). It takes understanding as its principal topic, seeking to interpret the meaning of social and cultural phenomenon from the point of view of actors (Schwandt 2007). Since my study of visual-based design phenomena involves artifacts as well as people, the mode and source of understanding is necessarily two-fold yet interrelated. After Barnard (2001), my interpretive paradigm is further made up of structuralist and hermeneutic approaches.

Structuralism as used here as a way of thinking about the world. It is concerned with identifying the underlying structure of an aspect of the world that cannot be observed but must be inferred (Schwandt 2007). Often, as in my study context, structure refers to some unconscious value system in housing, culture and the wider society. It is the external and

underlying forces in social contexts that give meaning to cultural phenomena, such as the “new signage” and “estate art” phenomenon. Structuralism assumes social reality. The structuralist approach to understanding takes physical or concretely accessible objects as “text” (Geertz 1983, 31);⁵⁴ which is decipherable using sets of cultural codes as interpretive frames. Their meanings are determined and regulated by relationships, not in some inherent significance in the objects themselves.

Hermeneutics was first concerned with interpreting ancient scripture such as biblical and classical [literary] texts (Van Manen 1997, 179). A key point about the tradition is that the creators of the text are usually not available to provide information about the significance of their works, just as the designers of name signs and public art are not present to explain meaning to residents. But this is not why the study calls for hermeneutics. The term, as used in this inquiry, focuses on a way of thinking about the world. It argues that understanding and meaning are the business of individuals; that the different interests, positions, beliefs of different individual people are productive of such interpretation. Human meaning, in this sense, is individually-based. This is the meaning of the term adopted here.

The hermeneutic mode of understanding can be developed in phenomenological in-depth interviews by drawing out people’s description and interpretation of their experiences, which are further interpreted by the researcher.

The combination of the philosophical underpinnings of structuralism and hermeneutics is productive for visual research. In Barnard’s (2001) view, approaching a text structurally as far as social and cultural structure is used to inform meanings; hermeneutically in so far as people are used to explain meanings; since “individual human subject or consciousness . . . [and] . . . structures, both are the basis for understanding” (195). With reference to Ricoeur, he argues, “structural analysis is not possible ‘without a hermeneutic comprehension’ . . . hermeneutic comprehension is impossible without structure” (Ricoeur 1974, 60 in Barnard 2001, 198-199).

⁵⁴ As Geertz (1983) suggests, customs, social change, and cultural phenomenon are in some sense “readable” like texts.

In my research, socio-semiotics is used as a structural mode of understanding the meanings in visual design. For the meanings of lived experience, I conducted a phenomenological study for a hermeneutic mode of understanding about cultural activities – “meanings, experience, beliefs, values” (Crotty 1995) – arising from residents’ engagement with name signs and public art. The two modes of understanding complement each other, providing a solid paradigm for this inquiry. They coincide with the two component research strategies and the two data collection methods, as delineated in the next chapter.

Developing a theoretically informed methodology

A general concern of this research is how visual communication, as a discipline, as a practice, and as design objects, can contribute to the global effort of sustainable development. The issue is explored in the context of Hong Kong PRH estates. The focus of my study lies in the visual manifestations of cultural sustainability by estate name signage and public art sculptures installed around the estates. The practical purpose of study involves the analysis of the design of environmental visual objects for their cultural meanings on one hand, and the interpretation of how such meanings influence residents' lived experience encountering the visuals, on the other hand.

Thus, my methodology, or research strategy (Crotty 1995) must be capable of addressing both the meanings of design, and meanings of experience. In developing the strategy, I took into considerations the range of theoretical traditions – rhetoric, semiotics, and phenomenology – that have driven my research in the first place. A mixed-method approach was developed by combining two qualitative strategies: socio semiotics and phenomenology. To elicit the meanings of visuals, I utilize the approach of socio-semiotics; to understand lived experience, I took the phenomenological approach. They complement each other in terms of what might be overlooked if one single approach is used.

My methodology is also a plan of action linking my study goal and research questions to the empirical research activities. So, after explicating the strategy, I discuss my

researcher’s role, negotiation of access to the setting, and sampling logic. The chapter continues with details of my research method, or data collection method, and data analysis; it concludes with a discussion of the trustworthiness of findings and some ethical considerations of the inquiry. Figure 7.1 shows the various sources for shaping my choice of an interpretive paradigm and for informing my other methodological decisions.

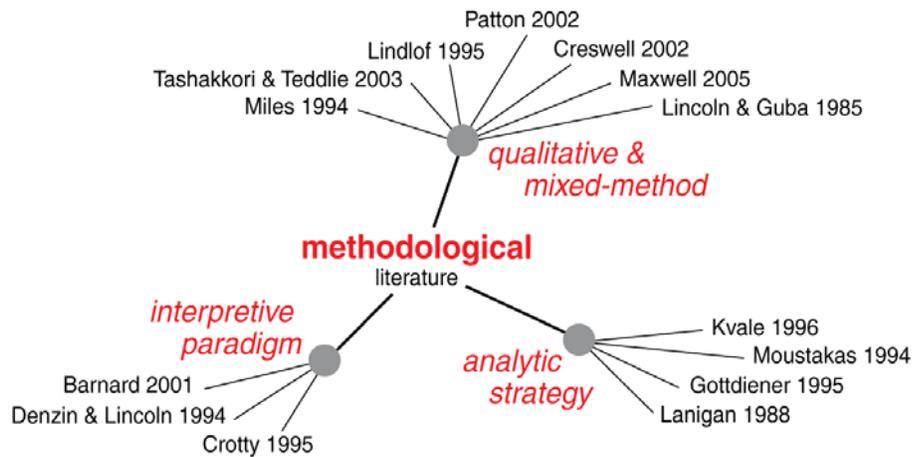


Figure 7.1
Main sources from literature that shape the choice of paradigm and methodology

7.1 Research strategy: “concurrent nested qual+QUAL”

A mixed-method research strategy with an inductive approach is exceptionally useful to this inquiry because it is meant for “developing meanings and interpretation of a phenomenon,” as Tashakkori & Teddlie (2003) explain. My research strategy was modeled on Tashakkori & Teddlie’s “mixed methods design qual+QUAL” (2003) and Creswell’s “concurrent nested strategy” (2003). It shaped my choice and use of particular methods and linked them to the desired outcomes (Crotty 1995).

“Qual+QUAL,” in the sense of Tashakkori & Teddlie, is the use of two qualitative methods simultaneously, one of which is dominant (the capitalized one), with findings of the other method (lower case) informing the results of the dominant one. While both methods are interrelated within a broad topic, each is designed to respond to different research questions resulting in a better understanding of the overall research problem.

In a “concurrent nested strategy,” Creswell emphasizes that in one single data collection phase the method that is given less priority is embedded within the dominant method. By “nesting,” he means that each of the methods addresses a different question or seeks information from different levels, yet the dominant method guides the overall project. Data collected from the two methods are mixed during analysis.

I integrated the strengths of both approaches into a more complete strategy, which I named “concurrent nested qual+QUAL.” It combines two qualitative-driven approaches – interview-based socio-semiotics (Gottdiener 1995) and phenomenological approach (e.g. Lanigan 1988, Van Manen 1997, Moustakas 1994) for the following reasons:

My inquiry is phenomenological in orientation, that is, it employed the features, characteristics and theoretical assumptions of phenomenology as a framework for describing the lived experience of residents with visual objects. Human consideration was primary to my study. Yet, I also believe that there is an evitable underlying socio-cultural structure, within which perception and experience occur; that purely phenomenological methods may ignore the world of objects as signification systems.

Thus socio-semiotics in a structuralist approach is brought in as a supplementary component to the hermeneutic approach of phenomenology. I recognized the significant role of design and meanings of visual objects in constituting human experience; social semiotics offered assumptions about the meaning aspects of phenomena in their social context. The structuralist approach is less dominant, yet significant in terms of providing data for the concurrent investigation of human experience. The other approach, phenomenology, is

dominant. It aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the meaning of experience as people live through it. It forms the base, or core, of the inquiry.

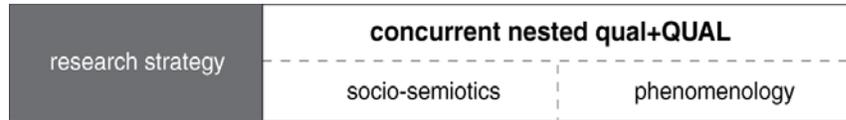


Figure 7.2
A mixed-method research strategy.

7.1.1 A socio-semiotic approach to visual design

Environmental objects, under a traditional semiotic perspective, are arbitrary visual signs. Their meanings are determined by an internal relationship between signifier and signified, as well, constrained by cultural convention and agreement. The problem in not considering external forces is articulated by Ricoeur (1976), “[traditional semiotics] are being closed . . . without relations to the external, non-semiotic reality . . . no substantial existence” (5). One way to overcome this limitation is to appreciate design’s external factors. Socio-semiotics, as explicated by Gottdiener (1995), assumes the importance of the “exo-semiotic” (ibid., 25) processes of culture and society, and the value system of the particular social groups involved in meaning making. Thus it is taken as the first component of my mixed-method approach.

Applying the assumption of the exo-semiotic to my inquiry, housing ideology in local culture and the social context in which signage and public art are created and installed become important.

Gottdiener’s (1995) approach claims a “revised branch of semiotics” (ibid., 24), emphasizing the social production of meanings and the material aspects of cultural

phenomenon. He follows the tradition of Eco, who was much influenced by Peirce – both see semiotics fundamentally cultural in its approach. But for them, culture necessarily includes material forms. At one point, Gottdiener criticizes mainstream semiotics in dealing only with “conception of culture, i.e. the mental image” (ibid., 25-26). His semiotics, instead, accounts for the mental as well as the material. But he adopts Saussure’s notions of “signifier,” “signified” and “signification,” Peirce’s concepts of “denotation” and “connotation,” and Hjelmslev’s (1969 cited in Gottdiener 1995) “content” and “expression.” Social semiotics, therefore, concerns the articulation of the relationship between signification and the material context of daily life, between meanings and the exo-semiotic processes of economics and politics under a social structure.

The premise of socio-semiotics taken here is that, any cultural object is a component in a system of signs, but it also has a history and social context important in the production of meanings (Gottdiener 1995). For traditional semiotics, signs have clear denotative as well as connotative meanings; socio-semiotics posits that all meanings arise from the codified dimension, so “connotation precedes denotation” (ibid., 26).

Also emphasized in my inquiry was the issue of materiality – being “encoded with ideological meanings which are engineered into form” (ibid., 28). I interpret “engineered” as the use of rhetorical means employed during the designing process to stylize the material form or visual object. Thus designing is encoding. The visual object, then, is the “expression,” or “signifier” of some cultural meanings, which is the “content,” or “signified” of the sign.

To strengthen the socio-semiotic approach, Gottdiener suggests interviewing people to obtain their “readings” of cultural objects, as a method designed to move beyond the single “expert-reading” approach of traditional semiotic analysis. This, he believes, can “overcome the static, synchronic structuralism that privileges the independent analysis of the interpreter” (ibid., 101). I conducted standardized open-ended interviews with participants to

obtain empirical data. Their readings, integrated with mine (expert-reading), were analyzed and categorized under a socio-semiotic framework to yield a set of visual, cultural codes.

7.1.2 A phenomenological approach to visual experience

The second component is phenomenology. According to Husserl, the object of study of phenomenology might be: (1) a phenomenon in the external world of the senses, (2) a visual quality in the sphere of experience, or (3) the symbolic manifestation of intellectual structures or processes' (cited in Burdek 2005, 240). The objects of my study were: (1) the human phenomenon of residents experiencing signage and public art, visual phenomena processed through viewing, engaging, sensing in the external environment of housing, (2) a visual character stylized by design, partly constitutive of residents' experience, and (3) the symbolic manifestation of ideas of cultural sustainability, which is an intellectual construct used to represent human ideals. The resemblance between Husserl's hypothesized occasion and the concrete housing situation makes phenomenology an appropriate approach for framing residents' experience.

As an interpretive framework, phenomenological analysis generates meaning units from the significant personal statements about the experience of a phenomenon. The kind of meanings to pursue in subsequent research emerge from people's "internal experience of something appears, visible, that which is perceived" – what Ricoeur (1976) calls "surplus meaning" i.e., meaning not exhausted by symbolization but derived from living through the experience – the lived meaning. Such meaning and experience are contained in phenomenological descriptions. Subsequent phenomenological interpretations of the descriptions make possible a hermeneutic understanding of the essence of experience.

The understanding is achieved through the perspective of the perceiver, the individual who experiences those things. Researchers describe and interpret people's

descriptions about how they make sense of a phenomenon. The approach is a striking departure from objectivist methods that assume a reality apart from human perception (Littlejohn 1989). Moreover, a phenomenological concern always has this twofold character: a preoccupation with both the concreteness, as well as the essential nature of a lived experience (Van Manen 1997).

Applying this approach to the study of visual experience in housing, I saw the concreteness of signage and public art in residents' experience, and the essential nature of such lived visual experience, both arresting my attention and curiosity. But my interest did not involve determining the legibility of signage information for orientation or identification, nor did I pay much attention to the artistic contribution of sculptures to the built environment. Rather I was concerned about the visual phenomenon as being "meaningfully experienced." What is it like for residents to watch or do anything with the visual objects? What are the mental conditions or interpretive positions for experiencing the environment the way they experience? How does that experience impact on residents' sense of identity, aspirations for future, or collective memories? In other words, what are the essences of shared experience, in terms of shaping their perception of attributes that contribute to the cultural sustainability of their housing community?

7.1.3 The interplay of two strategies

The theoretical approach to this work is built on two major assumptions of Lanigan's (1997) semiotic phenomenology: all communication is semiotic and by force of being constituted and regulated by systems of signs; all communication is also a phenomenology by the force of being constituted and regulated by experience. At the strategic level, semiotics and phenomenology interplayed in my research to become a "concurrent nested qual+QUAL" design; its outcome is a semiotic phenomenology – but not a semiotic phenomenology in the sense of Lanigan.

Lanigan's semiotic phenomenology was developed and has been applied, for example, to researching communication and the image in the context of television (1997). This inquiry has not followed strictly his procedure because Nicholson (1990) evaluates it as, "somewhat 'sketchy' . . . it does not address the diversity of ways in which meaning is constituted and disseminated in social life." Nicholson points out that in Lanigan's model, phenomenology was not given adequate attention, "A 'lifeworld' experience . . . would seem to be in need of a phenomenology whose strength is to encompass lived experience."

A "semiotic phenomenology," as I call it in my research, indicates the integrative use of semiotic and phenomenological approaches within a mixed-method design. Using the "new" strategy, the phenomenological procedures of conversational interviews and data analysis played a dominant role, supplemented with a minor but essential component of socio-semiotic analysis.

In terms of procedures, I combined Lanigan's with those proposed by Moustakas (1994), Van Manen (1997), Patton (2002), Kvale (1996) and Peterson (1987). These procedures include steps of bracketing and interviewing (data collection, deriving phenomenological descriptions), horizontalization and definition (data analysis, phenomenological reduction), and uncovering essences (phenomenological reflection and interpretation). Through integration and certain modifications, my procedure was meant to improve and expand Lanigan's semiotic phenomenological approach. Subsection 7.5 explains the details of the procedure.

7.2 The researcher's role

The researcher is the "human instrument" (Patton 2002; Creswell 2003; Merriam 1988; Kvale 1996) in qualitative inquiry. Often times, personal interests and the values of the researcher are introduced into the research process; his/her past experiences about the

research topic are explicitly identified. Even more, Merriam (1988) suggests that a researcher's disciplinary orientation may determine how a phenomenon is defined.

Given my background in public information design including years of service in the Hong Kong Urban Council and Housing Authority, starting the 1980s, I appreciate visual strategies that embrace humanistic values. Working in the public sector my task has been to promote civic wellbeing through the visual representation of information for circulation in the social-spatial environment. My presupposition of the phenomenon under study as being beneficial to people is therefore, shaped by my professional pursuit for positive human outcomes from visual communication design. (See related discussion in 1.6.)

With respect to my knowledge acquired in preparation for this research, my master's study equipped me with the theoretical study of design and access to cultural authorship. Later in the PhD Design program, I was exposed to a diversity of literature from design and cognition, to environment-behavior studies, environmental aesthetics, and architectural and housing studies, to name a few. These disciplines investigate human psychology and behaviors within physical and cultural settings (e.g., Bechtel 1997; Nearby 1994; Canter 1977; Nasar 1988).

I began to synthesize their principles and methods from my own field of visual design and cognate disciplines such as sociology, communications and cultural studies. Concepts and theories in design, environmental perception, rhetoric, semiotics, phenomenology, as well as discourse on sustainable development, enriched my background knowledge. Professional interest, coupled with insights and ideas drawn from various fields, form the basis of this inquiry.

The starting point of phenomenological research is, according to Van Manen (1997) "largely a matter of identifying what it is that deeply interests you or me . . . and of identifying the interested phenomenon as some experience that human beings live through" (40). In his view, the researcher has to orient herself to the phenomenon of interest, implying

a vantage point in life. As the researcher for this inquiry, I identified two interrelated phenomena as of deep interest to me – the visual phenomena of signage and public art in housing, the human phenomenon of residents’ experience engaging with the visuals. I oriented myself to these phenomena from the vantage points of a visual designer, a native “Hongkonger,” and a design researcher.

As a visual designer, I looked for clues to understanding the kinds of meanings supported by the visual objects. Growing up in Hong Kong, I went through the ups and downs of the territories in many facets of life, as did my fellow citizens. I developed an affective connection to public housing residents whose experiences of a drastically changing visual environment became the subject of my research. As a “Hongkonger,” my empathy for the quality of their visual lives, my accessibility to their activities and my ability to take and understand their thoughts and feelings, enhanced my role as the researcher. Ultimately I wanted to map their experiences of what it is like to perceive attributes of cultural sustainability through the visual means of environmental objects.

Methodologically, my role as the researcher had two major functions. First, I performed expert readings on the meaning of visuals from a socio-semiotic perspective; second, as a phenomenological researcher, I interpreted the meanings of visual experiences from the perspective of the researched. For this I needed to negotiate access to my research setting and to my participants.

7.3 Access

There is a reality about doing field research, “no entrée, no research” (Johnson 1975, 50). Achieving successful entry was a prerequisite for my site-specific field project, for there was no alternative to my desired setting in the Hong Kong PRH estates or to participants who are housing residents; nothing would better support my exploration of the “particularized research questions” (Maxwell 2005).

In May 2006, I wrote the Authority to request permission for conducting interviews at selected estates. I also sought assistance in locating residents to participate in the interviews. The Authority is a large-scale organization. I approached senior administrative officials at the headquarters with a letter of introduction, an endorsement from my dissertation committee chair, and a brief research plan approved by the institutional review board (IRB) from my academic institution. The letter presented my background and indicated my general substantive interest in exploring the cultural components of sustainability in the public housing context. I was promptly granted official clearance for research. Perhaps, increasing local concern about issues of sustainability⁵⁵ also helped to identify my research as worthy of support.

At the central administrative level, I talked with subject officers who listened carefully to my research rationale and delineation of the needs and support I was seeking. As a result, I was updated about the distributed locations of the recently installed name signs and sculptures that are the objects of my analysis. Not only that, I acquired information about the public art scheme and was briefed by an art promotion officer from the Leisure and Cultural Services Department. Housing staff, in order to provide me with a comprehensive understanding of the historical development of Hong Kong public housing, toured me around the Exhibition Centre. I was given access to their library. I received literature and complimentary publications and was assisted in locating relevant records and materials. Subsequently, they referred me to the management of my study estates – Yat Tung Estate in North Lantau, Kin Ming Estate in East Kowloon, and a couple of other estates.

Johnson also notes that all entries are progressive in that a researcher gets to know more people as her research proceeds. Indeed, I accumulated a large list of contacts; for example, at the estate level, I met with staff of District Tenancy Management Offices / Estate

⁵⁵ The Council for Sustainable Development was established in 2003 to give advice on the preparation of a sustainable development strategy for Hong Kong.

Office. I explained my investigation activities – interviewing, field observation and photographing of the physical surrounding within estates. Not only was consent given to start working around the estates, but security guards were also assigned to accompany me on location. The escort service, which I determined would likely obstruct the natural interaction between the interviewees and myself, was declined with appreciation.

Housing staff, however, could not officially assist me in locating research participants, I was granted approval to approach residents as potential interviewees upon the individual's willingness and consent. Moreover, they brought to my attention information about local community social groups, such as Tai Chi class and a badminton groups which I could contact to solicit participation. At this point, I assumed my negotiated access was a success. I felt it was a better idea to contact residents by myself in the natural setting of the concourse, playground, and resting areas around estates, to ensure those who agreed to be interviewed met my sampling criteria.

7.4 Sampling

My sampling logic for selecting units of analysis was based on a theoretical, or purposive, strategy (Lincoln & Guba 1985; Patton 2002): that is, according to the needs of my study rather than for the representativeness of the sample. I needed to have samples of sites/estates, environmental objects, and participants that had the potentials to shed light on the issues of communication and the perception of cultural sustainability in housing. I made use of the strength of theoretical sampling to choose units that were rich in data and had relevance to my research questions.

Sites and estates. The decision to select particular estates as my research settings was based on the belief that their visible character was crucial to manifesting cultural values, that activities taking place in the environment externalized residents' fulfillment and pleasure.

My study estates are located in the two sites of Tung Chung New Town and Tseung Kwan O New Town (see figure 7.3). Site A Tung Chung contains two of my study estates – Yat Tung Estate I and Yat Tung Estate II; 20 pieces of public art made them the perfect settings for research into residents’ experience of the estate art phenomenon. Site B Tseung Kwan O New Town is built on reclaimed land in Sai Kung, a rural district in eastern Kowloon. In this site, King Ming Estate and Sheung Tak Estate were chosen as study locations for their distinctive residential signage design, which demonstrated a new signage phenomenon.



Figure 7.3
Research sites: Tung Chung new town and Tseung Kwan O new town.

Name signs & sculptures. In 2005, I visited many estates across Hong Kong to collect an initial sample of 40 name signs and public art. These environmental objects were attractive to me for their visual dynamics and distinctive cultural references, which actually inspired the formulation of my dissertation topic years ago. The decision to choose both estate name signs (which formed part of the signage system in the estates) and public art as objects of analysis was based on the rhetorical assumption that no visuals are neutral – both information-based and aesthetic-based visual objects are possibly persuasive, despite being different genres of environmental objects. I also borrowed the perspective of visual culture to

take these “everyday objects” as my serious objects of study.

In 2006, I embarked on my field research. I went around to all the selected estates to collect samples. I photographed them and then undertook a sorting task to reduce the number of name signs and sculptures. The objective of the final sorting was to include only designs that represent a diversity of approaches – from traditional to novel. The final sample comprises 17 sculptures (PA1 – PA17) and 12 name signs (NS1 – NS12). A reduced size photograph of each of the 29 objects is included in appendix A with a key number assigned to each object. The manageable number of visuals avoided the fatigue of participants in viewing a larger number of photographs. They offered variety in visual appeal, which was likely to yield a wealth of meanings arising from their particular design forms and construction.

Participants. Hong Kong public housing provides accommodation for millions of people but I was interested only in the segment of population who encounter the “estate art” and “new signage” phenomenon on a daily basis. My interview participants came only from the population of the four study neighborhoods. “Stratified purposive sampling” (Patton 2002) was used to illustrate views of the four subgroups. Prior to entering the field, I constructed a sampling frame based loosely on the stratified subgroups typical of this population: (A) elderly (male or female, 60 yrs. old and above, mostly retired), (B) manual/office worker (male or female, 30-59 yrs. old), including people taking on different occupations, (C) housewife (25-59 yrs. old homemaker), and (D) student (male or female, 12-24 yrs. old). I intended to recruit eight persons from each group.

The process of deliberately selecting a heterogeneous sample is a maximum-variation technique of purposive sampling (Patton 2002). Presumably, differences in age, dwelling history and occupation would likely affect residents’ aesthetic preference, aspiration for life, thus providing variations in responses. However, the technique also allowed me to observe commonalities among them.

Beginning in July 2006, I spent much time in each of the four neighborhoods

chosen for study. I engaged in watching, listening, participating in morning exercises, badminton games, chatting with shoppers in the wet market, and observing and photographing resident activities in open space where name signs and sculptures locate. I made an effort to become acquainted with my target residents, and subsequently, to solicit them to become my interviewees.

Within the two months in the field, I approached 38 residents. Twenty-nine of them expressed the interest and immediate availability to be interviewed – we began the interview sessions right on the spot, in gardens, badminton courts or sitting on the stone bench or on the audience seats around the court. Five regretted that they were unable to give the time or were reluctant to participate; four indicated their interest but that they were unable to be interviewed immediately. For these potential participants, I requested that we make appointments to meet again – two agreed to do so.

Eventually 31 participants were interviewed, including 15 females and 16 males. They all met the basic criteria: (a) being a public housing resident, (b) living through the visual phenomenon of name signs or public art, and (c) being able to articulate their views and experiences. The socio-economic status of participants did not constitute as a big consideration – they shared similar status with the average family income in this housing context as regulated by the maximum income limit.⁵⁶ (See table 7.1.)

⁵⁶ The maximum income limit per month for a 4-person family to be eligible for living in Hong Kong public rental housing is HK\$15,368 (HK\$7.8 = US\$1) as in 2006 (www.housingauthority.gov.hk)

Table 7.1
Sampling of participants.

	elderly	worker	housewife	student	total
starting sampling frame	8	8	8	8	32
residents contacted	10	10	8	8	38
residents interviewed	8	10	6	7	31
successful interviews	6	10	4	6	26

7.5 Research methods / data collection

My research method was informed by my research strategy. Being consistent with the mixed-method approach, my data collection method was characterized by an interview activity in which two types of interrelated data were created – those related to the meanings of visual objects, and those regarding residents’ experience encountering visuals. In one single interview session I put together two techniques by: (1) asking standardized open-ended questions, and (2) initiating informal conversation (Patton 2002). Standardized questions were given less priority and embedded within conversational questions making concurrent flows of activity. Both types of data emerged from participants’ interview responses which contain “descriptions of experience through first-person accounts” (Moustakas 1994, 21).

Descriptions⁵⁷ obtained were not limited to those by the researched, but also those by the researcher (Van Manen 1997). Typical to phenomenological study,

⁵⁷ By description, I refer to the phenomenological sense of description of “things” we experience – hearing, seeing, believing, remembering, deciding, feeling, judging, evaluating and experiences of bodily action. (Schwandt 2001).

self-reflection of the researcher before, during and after the interview process could be counted as part of the data, as are visual depictions of life situations or art works (Moustakas 1994). Thus, I obtained “experiential data,”⁵⁸ as well as visual data – photographs of residents interacting with environmental objects. I made experiential data through a reflective process known as “bracketing” (Husserl in Lindlof 1995), during which I provided my own descriptive account of the phenomenon and its context. Visual data, which are the photographic images of visual objects and activity, are used throughout this dissertation to illustrate and reinforce the verbal narratives. (See figure 7.4.)

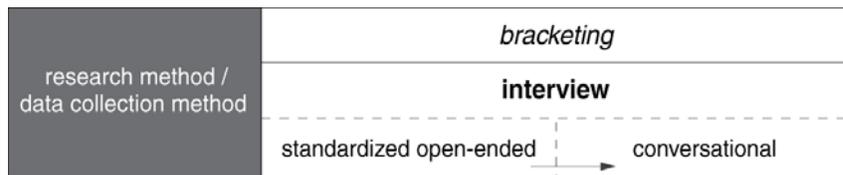


Figure 7.4
Data collection through bracketing and interview.

7.5.1 Bracketing: the researcher’s self-reflection

Bracketing was the first step of my phenomenological study; the idea of this technique is for the researcher to become aware of the preconceptions he or she holds about the object of study – the object is “bracketed” (ibid., 236) or suspended. This way, the researcher “stays away from ordinary ways of perceiving things . . . the everyday understandings, judgments, and knowings are set aside” (Moustakas 1994). However, being a

⁵⁸ “Experiential data” are data “in the head,” drawn from the researcher’s personal, research, and literature-reading experiences. (Strauss & Corbin 1998)

visual designer as well as the researcher, I inevitably brought in own perspective and interpretive lens to perceiving the visual phenomenon, such as my professional objective to seek the positive human implications of design and my theoretical assumptions about the rhetorical and semiotic nature of design and communication.

By bracketing I became conscious of these presuppositions. I stayed alert that they might “color” my field exploration, but I could not totally stay away. In this respect, I concur with Kvale (1997), who holds that to set aside prejudgment does not necessarily involve an absence of presuppositions, but a consciousness of the researcher’s own presuppositions – a position I take throughout the inquiry. I tend to take bracketing as the preparation and experience necessary for research, an ongoing analytic process, not a single fixed event, as Patton (2002) says.

The acknowledgement of my role as the researcher (see 7.2) represents the beginning of my bracketing. It was prior to opening my research when I reflected upon my prior knowledge and personal experience as having direct or indirect impact on my perspective on the study issues.

Entering the field, I continued the thought process while immersing myself in the visual aspects of design, in learning about the historical background of the visual display. I documented the substance of bracketing – observation, perception and information – as reflective descriptions, which somehow were influenced by assumptions of rhetoric and semiotics. Bracketing provided contextual understanding about the socio-cultural environments of housing where the visual phenomena occur. They are presented in 8.1.

7.5.2 Standardized open-ended interview

The most essential data required for my research were obtained through the primary means of collecting data – interviews with participants. Through open-ended

questions I had participants describe their associations with individual designs, as well as the overall visual phenomenon. In this standardized format, I asked all participants essentially the same sets of questions, but they were encouraged to attribute their values to physical objects. (See interview protocol at appendix C.) There were no imposing categories, or “start list”⁵⁹ to begin with – a measure taken to maintain methodological integrity with the related “interview-based,”⁶⁰ socio-semiotic analysis. Interview transcripts containing participants’ descriptions of visuals form the basis on which to generate typical design themes, or cultural codes, of the name signs and public art.

Often, the design of signage and public art is comprised of verbal typography (name of estate), visual images (animals or human figures, as components of sculpture), graphics (pictorial representation, e.g. sky and trees) and sometimes numbers. I do not separate the analysis either of type or image even though verbal and visual languages exercise their conceptual and aesthetic power in unique ways. To delimit the scope of investigation, I look to elicit holistic meanings that are the results of their integration.

On-the-spot analysis. Kvale (in Miles 1994) also points out that during an open-ended interview much interpretation occurs along the way. This has been true in my case. On the side of interviewees, a semiotic perspective assumes that they see visual design as signs, that they have the capacity for sign-interpretation, that they are able to transform their interpretations into meanings through decoding. So, as they reflected and interpreted, they discovered in the designs new layers of meaning, which may be added to their phenomenological descriptions of lived experience. On my side, I relied heavily on participants’ decoded meanings to grasp an idea of what types of design work best to communicate a sense of cultural sustainability for them.

⁵⁹ Miles & Huberman (1994) suggest creating a “start list” of codes prior to fieldwork. The list comes from the conceptual framework, list of research questions, or hypothesis.

⁶⁰ Being interview-based, data emerge from the field.

As interviews proceeded, I inescapably condensed and interpreted their associations – not as a separate analysis activity but as an immediate, reflexive thought process in which I synthesized my participants’ readings with mine, based on my socio-cultural knowledge. This I call a first level of socio-semiotic analysis – “on-the-spot” analysis. In addition, a second level of analysis takes place at a later stage when all open-ended questions were completed; responses systematically compared, combined and abstracted for a set of cultural codes to emerge (see 7.6.1). Concurrently, the expressed meanings of design enriched the content of phenomenological interview questions.

7.5.3 Conversational interview: phenomenological description

This technique combines Patton’s (2002) “informal conversational interview” and “interview guide” approaches. Conversational interview is a phenomenological approach to interviewing. The guide approach “provides topics or subjects areas within which the interviewer is free to explore, probe, and ask questions that will elucidate and illuminate the particular subject” (ibid., 343). Together, they derive phenomenological description from participants (Lanigan 1988; Kvale 1996a). This sort of description pertains to meanings of experience identified from the vantage point of the self rather than from that of a culture.

I began all conversations with an unbiased, receptive presence. In prolonged interview sessions my participants and I entered into dialogues; I listened to them, prompted them to create direct, or naïve, descriptions of feelings and sometimes, stories about experiencing the visual objects or environment. My goal of conducting conversational interviews using a guide was to explore what it is like to have an experience that creates a sense of cultural sustainability.

To that end, I designed the guide around the eight existing attributes: (1) manifesting energetic creativity, (2) expressing value diversity, (3) evoking human

enjoyment, (4) enhancing community wellbeing, (5) articulating community identity, (6) preserving cultural heritage, (7) recognizing human dignity, and (8) sustaining collective memory. Under these topics, I sought to understand, for example, how do participants connect the visual experience to their own life? Are they close to the kinds of experiences suggested by the attributes?



Figure 7.5
Sampling herb tea while conducting an interview in Yat Tung Estate.



Figure 7.6
Engaging in a dialogue with a research participant; other residents look on, Yat Tung Estate.

Not following a strict “question and answer” interview format, the list provides a topic protocol under which I developed questions when some interviewees seem less articulate in their descriptions. For instance, to explore perceptions on the issue of identity, I asked them to describe what kind of social images they think the style of certain name signs suggest to them, “How does it feel to be represented by the sign?” Typical of depth interview, I used participants’ responses “to delve more deeply into the topic” (Sommer 1980, 82). I probed, “How does it change your feelings of living in public housing?” A question under the topic of enjoyment asks, “Do you take pleasure seeing the signs on your way to the bus stop everyday? How does it feel?” (See appendix C for full interview protocol.)

Not only did the topics serve as prompts to elicit descriptions about the lived meanings, but the list was my interpretive framework through which I analyzed the descriptive data in my search for aspects of experience that alluded to dimensions of cultural sustainability. Descriptions indicating any dimensions felt and perceived while engaging with visual objects could either confirm, eliminate, or expand existing attributes.

Questions developed under the guide were not restricted or prescribed. Sometimes I adapted wording and sentence structure to better fit particular interviewee’s cognitive style. Moreover, questions could be individualized to establish in-depth communication with the interviewee (Patton 2002). So, at times, I adjusted my language and tone, rephrased questions to adapt to participants of different ages and backgrounds. As a result, descriptions gathered from conversational interviews were quite different and rich in meanings. Such are the “surplus of meaning” that could not be sought from social conventions, but from individual human experiences.



Figure 7.7
The natural setting for interviewing at Kin Ming Estate.



Figure 7.8
The natural setting for interviewing at Yat Tung Estate.

Conversational interview questions also made use of the immediate surroundings to increase the concreteness and immediacy of questions and responses (Patton 2002). As my participants and I conversed, we frequently referred to the visual objects on site, supplemented the photographs of name signs and sculptures taken from other estates. But most of my questions turned out to flow from the natural settings. One day I interviewed an old woman at the entrance to her housing block. From where we sat a public art mural featuring an ancient map of Lantau Island was visible. Her sight stopped at the mural, which drew me to ask her, “What comes to your mind seeing this?” The question grew out of the immediate situation and awakened her reminiscence of the kind of life led by her ancestors.

In one single data collection activity, the predominant conversational interview questions got people to discuss what they see, judge, feel and think. This segment of

interview produced data, in the form of full descriptions, and is the basis for understanding their inner perceptions relevant to cultural sustainability. But it all began with their external perception of “things in themselves” (Husserl in Moustakas 1994), that is, the sensation of visual objects to which they attached meanings. Their descriptions of associations with these objects are contained in interview transcripts and constitute part of the data.

7.5.4 Interview format, timeframe, and transcription

Format. When approaching potential interviewees, I introduced myself and told them of the purpose of my study, then invited them to participate. If they had an interest to be interviewed, they were asked whether they lived in the neighborhood, simply to ascertain their resident status. Other demographic details, such as age, were sought at the end of interview. My interview protocol comprised an interview guide and a list of standardized questions. The guide contained topics and developed questions that were more personal and flexible – they got individuals to reflect on their own experiences. Embedded within were the more standardized, open-ended questions. The combination was desirable – it worked in a way Patton describes: “thus a number of basic questions may be worded precisely in a predetermined fashion, while permitting the interviewer . . . to explore certain subject in greater depth during the latter part or midway through by an interview guide” (204).

In this format I started by asking people about their general impressions of the visual environment. Then I turned to standardized questions that focused on the design of visual objects, before probing in depth about their personal experiences. At times I went back to ask questions about the design as appropriate. This way, the procedure adhered to the concurrent nested strategy – nesting open-ended questions within informal conversation developed from the guide. I also used visual aids that showed name signs and sculptures from other locations; interviews became lively and interesting when interviewees examined the photographs, which tended to provoke active responses.



Figure 7.9

A housewife expresses her feelings about the visual objects in her environment, assisted by visual aids, at Yat Tung Estate.

I usually allowed participants a few minutes to go through the photographs before raising questions, such as, “Tell me something you can think of when you see the sculptures’ and ‘What words come to mind when first you look at them?’” “In your opinion, what do these figures of sculptures stand for?” “Do they remind you of something in the Chinese tradition?” My focus of interest was the terms and local language they used to express their associated meanings of visuals.

In spite of the preparation of topical protocol, the sequence of questions asked and conversation content did not proceed exactly as scheduled. This is common in qualitative research since some items tend to trigger more interest; when this happened, I allowed participants to guide the discussion – this usually yielded maximum information. The

concurrent activity that involved people in describing “what they see” and their “lifeworld,” followed by my own summaries and reflections of the interpreted meaning of the visual environment exemplifies what Kvale (1988 in Miles 1994) calls “co-authoring,” that is, data are not totally collected but “made” through co-authoring.

Timeframe. Each interview lasted for 45 minutes to an hour. Anticipating prolonged engagement with each interviewee, I conducted 31 interviews in nine weeks during July, August, and September 2006. I spent more time in Tung Chung, interviewing 19 respondents in Yat Tung Estate I and Yat Tung Estate II, focusing on residents’ experience of public art sculptures. Twelve interviews were conducted in Kin Ming Est. and Seung Tak Estate mainly seeking their impressions of estate name signs.

Transcription. All the interviews were conducted in Cantonese, the most common spoken Chinese dialect in Hong Kong. A few interviewees spoke dialects that are beyond my language competency, for example, the “northerners” – people from the northern provinces of China – or “Hakkanese.” Since I could hardly grasp their meaning I considered their interviews unsuccessful. Conversely, some spoke “Chiuchownese,” which happens to be my native dialect – these interviews were very productive. Other than five incidents, all participants’ descriptions were recorded in audio tapes and some in handwritten notes as well. The latter were field notes of what I observed of their expressions and happenings in the surroundings throughout the interviews. I completed the expanded field notes soon after the interviews. All interviews were then transcribed.

Transcriptions of taped research interviews were made according to Kvale’s (1996a) guideline: “doing justice to the interviewees, to imagine how they themselves would have wanted to formulate their statements in writing” (170). Accordingly, I made detailed transcripts from all taped interviews; however, some are more precise than others, however, due to the richness of their descriptions. I transcribed answers as spoken – recording direct quotes exactly as they were said for the folk words used that seemed meaningful. For others I paraphrased – recording my impression of what the interviewees meant by omitted irrelevant phrases.

As I transcribed, I translated, from Chinese spoken words into English written words. Common Chinese names are assigned to the 26 participants. (For a summary of participant record please refer to appendix B.) The interview from an oral to a written mode is in itself a beginning analysis. Descriptive data that appeared as 26 separate transcripts were then subject to socio-semiotic analysis, as well as horizontalization and definition – the steps of data reduction in the phenomenological analysis.

7.6 Data analysis methods

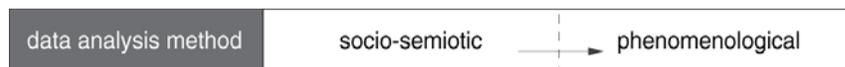


Figure 7.10
Data analysis methods

I chose my method of data analysis in accordance to my mix-method approach. There was the “overlap and intermesh” (Weiss 1994) typical of qualitative data collection and data analysis in my method. In fact, analysis has started during data collection (see 7.5.2) – as soon as I got people’s perceptions of visual objects, I processed their reading processed together with my expert reading, on-the-spot, within a socio-semiotic framework. Tentative design themes came to mind as I compared, contrasted and abstracted common meanings, mentally, on the sites. It was a spiral, iterate rather than linear thought process. Possibly, ideas may have been “sent” back to participants in the course of our conversation, influencing their description of lived experience in the concurrent phenomenological interview. Below I discuss the method, beginning with the procedures of socio-semiotic analysis; followed by the dominant procedures of phenomenological analysis.

7.6.1 Decoding visuals: socio-semiotic analysis

To capture the meanings of design, I processed my participants' readings together with my expert reading within a socio-semiotic framework.

The basic model. Data analysis in the qualitative tradition generally implies the “systematic procedures followed in order to identify essential features and relationships” (Wolcott 2001, 581) from data. However, Gottdiener's socio-semiotic approach does not demonstrate any rigid or systematic analytic steps as does traditional semiotic analysis (e.g. Manning 1987; Feldman 1995). Its strength lies in the initiation of a model of the sign that reveals the conceptual relationship between ideology⁶¹ and material forms. It is precisely such theoretical insight that attracted me and encouraged me to consider the influence of these factors in my study context.

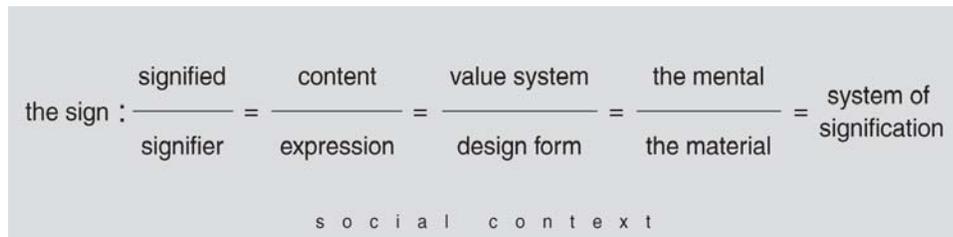


Figure 7.11

The decomposition of the sign according to social semiotics (adapted from Gottdiener 1995).

The model suggests that any related group of material objects, for example in the built environment, can be taken as a sign in that it connotes something other than its principal function. Individual objects are signifiers, expression of the Sign. Their meanings are the signifieds, or the content of the sign, regulated by the ideology, or value system held by those

⁶¹ Ideology is defined in the socio-semiotic sense as the value systems of social groups. Gottdiener 1995.

for whom the objects are meant, in a particular context. The articulation between the signifiers (the material), and the signified (the mental) generates systems of signification.

Application of the model. My visual analysis utilized the model, yet it integrated some rhetorical assumptions. I conceptualized the new signage and estate art phenomenon as the materialization of the Authority’s intention to respond to an “exigence” – cultural needs of relocated or resettled residents who were adapting themselves to the housing community. The visual phenomenon of new signage and estate art were taken as the sign which is made up of signifiers and signifieds.⁶² According to Gottdiener’s model, individual name signs or public art are the signifiers, the material or expression of the sign. Meanings embodied in the visual objects are the signifieds, the mental or the content of the sign. Design was correlated to the expression of the sign; cultural meanings, mostly connotative and arising from residents’ interpretations of the designs, were correlated to the content of the sign (84).

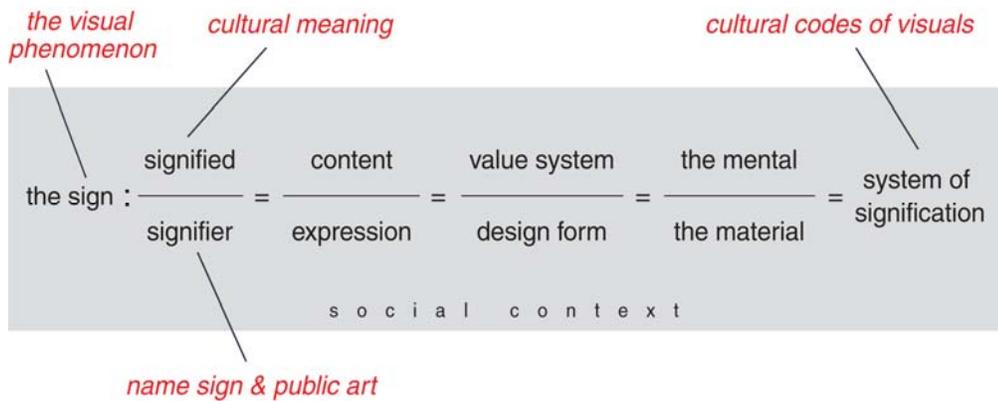


Figure 7.12
A framework of socio-semiotic analysis

⁶² Name signs and public art constitute just some of the many sign systems found in residential environments – that of building forms, landscape, and even public furniture.

Meanings are also conditioned by beliefs, desires, or the value system of public housing community, and external forces of Hong Kong culture and social environment. The articulation of the signifiers (visual objects) – and the signifieds (cultural meanings) arrived at a set of cultural codes, or signification of the visuals (figure 7.2). Since the codes correspond to the design themes of visuals, they facilitate an understanding of what, and how differentiations in design impact an awareness of cultural sustainability in the housing community. At this point I need to explicate how meanings have been attributed to the visual objects in the first place.

Encoding by design. Visual features embody codes, manifested as styles, which act as shorthand or sets of social or cultural values, asserts Macdonald (2002). This view of the visual suggests that cultural codes show a relationship to visual design. In the study estates, name signs and public art were endowed with values by the use of associational visual elements that draw on cultural preferences, as envisioned by the designer, who intended to project an idealized conception of life in housing. In other words, through a process of an encoding/rhetorical act, ideology is embedded in visual elements by the designer. Such are the designer's codes. What then on the side of the viewers? Do their readings, that is, their decoding of the designs, end up with the same set of meanings? What are the codes that can participants assign to the visual objects?

Decoding on viewing. The framework of social semiotics was used to analyze the visual phenomenon for codes – not those of the designer but of the residents. Since signification, in the sense of Gottdiener, is not determined by “an independent interpreter of culture” – the author or the researcher – but by certain group of individuals who use and make meanings from the sign based on their particular value system, an integration of both sources was methodologically ideal.

So I based my analysis on two sources of materials: first, descriptive data from participants in open-ended interviews; second, my own experiential data and professional

insight developed while situated in, and prior to entering, the research setting. These data result in the semiotic readings of the visual environment. Meaning making for new codes to emerge was grounded in, as well as constrained by our backgrounds; participants' perception also depended upon their interpretive positions or experiential conditions.

Steps of analysis. In order to overcome the abstraction of Gottdiener's model and to make up for its lack of methodological clarity,⁶³ I took on the technical task of coding the data. First, I read all transcripts that contain the 26 lived experience descriptions. I focused on responses to standardized questions to acquire a general sense of people's view of their visual environment that was characterized by signs and public art. Next, from the transcripts, I extracted relevant text, which contained information about what people did with and thought of the environmental objects as they went about their daily activities in their neighborhoods.

My focus of interest remained at the connotative, rather than the denotative level of signification. I looked for repeating ideas in the relevant text. They were incorporated into larger constructs representing the insightful signification found in the visual objects. Seven categories of meanings were unpacked upon the integration of residents' readings with mine.

Codes emerging. The technical task and mental processes, together, entailed a set of themes, signified by design variations representative of types of visual strategies. They are known by their semiotic status – codes. On labeling the codes, I worked inductively, waiting for people to suggest words and ideas. References were made to the terms and local language they used to express their meanings drawn from daily life. Despite, my role as the analyst in the socio-semiotic approach should not be trivialized – code names were determined by my design expertise and my sensitivity to the ideology embraced by the community – what values are held by these particular people?

I classified the 12 name signs and 17 sculptures by giving each visual object at

⁶³ Emmison & Smith (2000) observe a problem in Gottdiener's approach to identifying ideological codes of real estate signs, “. . . it is not clear how these codes were arrived at” (96). They suggest to strengthen the approach by grounding the findings “in the details of the phenomenon under investigation” (ibid.).

least one code. The meanings of the signs operating at the connotative level are multivalent. A name sign or a sculpture may depict elements from more than one code.

In the course of analysis, my basic knowledge of Hong Kong's historical background and my cultural competence was of great help. Only with an awareness of the social-psychological world of the residents could I become conscious of the rhetorical intentions behind the visual strategy, thus to identify the codes arising from these contexts.

7.6.2 Interpreting lived meanings: phenomenological analysis

Phenomenological analysis, through data reduction, seeks to elucidate the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of a phenomenon for a person or group of people (Patton 2002). The goal of my phenomenological analysis is to understand residents' experience engaging with the visual objects that have personal relevance, in particular, for their perception of a culturally sustainable community. Lived meaning in this context refers to the way that residents understand their experience as meaningful, through living it and can be grasped upon phenomenological analysis of their description of experience. The analysis began with reduction of data through the steps of "horizontalization" (Husserl in Moustakas 1994; Patton 2002) and "definition" (Lanigan 1988).

7.6.2.1 "*Horizontalization*"

Horizontalization is the phenomenological term for data reduction, an analytic technique that determines which part of people's description is truly relevant and which is not, in terms of revealing their shared experience of certain phenomenon. In horizontalizing, the researcher reads the entire interview transcriptions (descriptions) to extract significant statements or horizons that are related to the phenomenon under study. In this

“pre-reflective” (Moustakas 1994, 96; Van Manen 1997, 77) stage, all descriptions are spread out for examination, with all elements and perspectives having equal weight. Later, descriptive statements irrelevant to the topic and questions under study are deleted. The goal is to leave only the non-repetitive, relevant, meaning statements.

To have data “horizontalized” (Patton, 486) I did a first reading of the interviews to get a preliminary idea of the whole. I carefully examined the 26 transcripts that contained residents’ individual descriptions. In this pre-reflective experience, I located the key phrases which seems revealing something about what the visual experience of participants. I derived aspects of meaning associated with personal feelings, whether or not they implied ideas of cultural sustainability. The phrases were developed as significant statements or horizons. Statements unrelated to the research questions and those repetitive or overlapping were ignored. Horizons can be unlimited (Moustakas, 95). Each of the horizontal statements I identified was meaningful in its own right, though not necessarily pertinent to the total phenomenon. They are presented as “incidental themes” in chapter 8.

7.6.2.2 “*Definition*”

The term “definition,” or “depicting definition” (Lanigan 1988, 10), as used in phenomenological approach, indicates clustering the horizons into themes in order to depict or define a phenomenon of interest. In this inquiry, it is the total phenomenon – the visual display and the impact the visuals have on residents that make up their perception of cultural sustainability – that is to be depicted or defined.

Definition is the second step of phenomenological reduction during which experiential data contained in separate descriptions are reduced to systematic knowledge, in the form of interrelated themes. It corresponds to the analytic procedure of coding and categorizing in other qualitative analyze. Van Manen distinguishes a difference between the

pre-reflective understanding of experience and the reflective grasp of the phenomenological structure of experience. Definition is a reflective process versus the pre-reflective characteristic of horizontalization.

My process of definition involves grouping the central recurring ideas mentioned in horizontal statements into meaningful clusters while checking back original descriptions. These clusters are organized and linked together thematically. The actual task I began with was coding the statements. The idea in coding is to link what the respondent says to the concepts and categories (Weiss 1994, 154). The eight existing attributes of cultural sustainability were the concepts and categories to compare as I coded and named my categories. It was during this process that I looked for participants' beliefs, feelings, and desires that make up their perception of cultural sustainability. My focus of interest was: How did participant-generated themes differ from literature-derived themes? I paid attention to the variations of concepts, new perspectives, folk terms, and local words, and even idioms, used to describe experience.

By the end of the definition process, seven phenomenological themes were identified as having direct reference to the total phenomenon. Together they form a structure of experience; their meanings are seen as a whole to depict and define the kinds of lived experiences contributed to a perception of attributes of cultural sustainability. (See 8.5.2.)

7.6.3 Uncovering Essence: phenomenological reflection

Phenomenology “makes a distinction between appearance and essence, between the things of our experience and that which grounds the things of our experience . . . [and] consists of reflectively bringing into nearness that which tends to be obscure . . .” (Van Manen 1997, 32). For this inquiry, the “things of experience” are the visual objects and their meanings, literal and implied; “that which grounds the things of experience” are participants’

orientation of mind, interpretive positions, or the lenses through which they perceive and understand own experience – the essences. At this point of the analysis I searched for common essences of separate experiences.

What differentiates phenomenological analysis from other qualitative analyses is the search for essences. Essence is what makes a phenomenon what it is and without which the phenomenon could not be what it is (ibid., 107). How can I get at it? Van Manen states, “the insight into the essence of a phenomenon involves a process of reflectively appropriating, of clarifying . . . meaning of the lived experience” (ibid., 77).

This inquiry looks for two types of essences: first, phenomenological themes, representing the aspects of experience essential to the total experience – experiences that lead to perception of cultural sustainability. They are the “core meanings mutually understood through a phenomenon commonly experienced” (Patton 2002, 106). These themes are identified through the process of definition (see preceding section).

Second, interpretive position or experiential condition that ground the experience; as Van Manen notes, these internal forces are not apparent – these tend to be obscure. In this last step of phenomenological analysis, I engaged in reflective interpretation to uncover the experiential groundings of the total phenomenon – I was the reflecting self, my understanding of their experience, my object of reflection. Through the course of interacting with my participants, writing their vignettes, and interpreting their meanings and experience from their descriptions, I accumulated a sense of the energy underlying their inter-subjective meanings. These essences are presented in 8.6.

Figure 7.13 is a schematic representation linking the foundation for my research (the paradigm) to the domain of research (the strategy, data collection and data analysis methods). It shows the interpretive paradigm being embedded in approaches of socio-semiotics and phenomenology, which in turn inform the data collection and analysis methods. The following section discusses the trustworthiness of my study within the adopted methodology.

research paradigm	interpretivism	
	structuralism	hermeneutics
research strategy	concurrent nested qual+QUAL	
	socio-semiotics	phenomenology
research method / data collection method	<i>bracketing</i>	
	interview	
	standardized open-ended	conversational
data analysis method	socio-semiotic	phenomenological

Figure 7.13
Linking foundation for research to domain of research

7.7 Trustworthiness

The paradigm and methods of this inquiry are presented, but how could I affirm the validity of my findings resulting from the well-planned and justified methodological procedure? Was I illuminating the impact of visual objects on residents’ perception of cultural sustainability by what I did in the research, and therefore, the work is worthwhile? How can I persuade my readers that as the human instrument, I possess the quality and integrity for the investigation, and therefore, the results are trustworthy and authentic?

These questions concern the trustworthiness of the inquiry.

I thought about issues of trustworthiness early while designing the research as I believe that validation should, as Kvale (1996b) says, “move from inspection at the end of the production line to quality control throughout the stages of knowledge production.” With this in mind, I decided to use a mixed-method research strategy to triangulate methods and data – a measure of quality control was well established in advance.

In addition, I look to achieving “construct validity” (ibid.) since validity is not only an issue of method, but of the theoretical construct. This conception sees validity as “a process of developing sounder interpretations of observation” (ibid.); it pertains to phenomenological and interpretive analyses. I have strived to ensure that the theoretical constructs emerged from the study such as codes, themes, and attributes are sound, well-grounded, justifiable and convincing.

Although the term “validity” is used here, I am inclined to thinking of it as “authenticity”⁶⁴ or “kinds of understanding,” because validity is basically a positivist notion,⁶⁵ whereas authenticity and understanding are goals of qualitative research, such as my interpretive inquiry.

To address the issues more systematically, I employed Guba’s (1981) four criteria of trustworthiness to control and assess the overall quality of my research – credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. They are analogous criteria for judging trustworthiness in quantitative inquiry, which are internal validity, external validity or generalizability, reliability, and objectivity. Below I describe Guba’s standards, and then present some steps taken in my inquiry to meet the criteria.

Credibility. Credibility concerns the true value of findings and of interpretations of the various sources from which data were drawn. Guba suggests using the techniques of prolonged engagement at the site, persistent observation, collection of referential materials, triangulation, and negative case analysis to enhance the credibility of research. So for more than two months, I engaged myself in the research sites, immersed in the name signs and public art while approaching my participants. Not only did I observe, but I listened and joined in their activities. The persistent mingling with different social groups ensured me that my

⁶⁴ Guba & Lincoln 1989 in Maxwell 1992b, 280.

⁶⁵ Validity is developed as a term based on positivist assumptions that underline quantitative and experimental research. Ibid., 279.

participants are accurately identified; that they are the people who can answer my questions.

I also obtained promotional literature published by the Authority to gain some background of the development of environmental design in housing. Using a mixed-method strategy, multiple analyses, and samples of residents from four social sub-groups allowed triangulation of sources and methods. Prior to that, I did triangulation by constructing the RSP framework, which integrates multiple theories. The theories are not isolated but interrelated in terms of conceptualizing the nature and elements of visual communication.

Moreover, the resulting theoretical constructs – codes of visuals, themes of experience – are not separated but they confirm each other in terms of illuminating visual meanings and visual experience. Negative cases, which expose some unusual views of participants that might challenge my proposition about their perceptions, are discussed as limitations of findings in chapter 10. This combination of steps helps to produce credible findings.

Transferability. Transferability corresponds to the criteria of generalizability in quantitative research; both concern the applicability of findings to other contexts. In general, qualitative researchers hold that generalization is not possible because “phenomena are intimately tied to the times and the contexts in which they are found” (Guba 1981, 80). But they believe in the possibility of some transferability between two contexts because of certain essential similarities between them – their “fittingness.” To determine transferability, one must know a great deal about the contexts. Collecting thick description and doing theoretical sampling are two useful techniques – the former derives rich descriptive or interpretive statements from a particular context; the latter maximizes the range of information uncovered.

My inquiry of people experiencing their very own environment in Hong Kong PRH estates was context-bound; its intent was not to generalize findings. Even so, the methods used to produce findings would be applicable to other public housing settings that

share similarities in terms of the visual environment and residents' cultural background.

I argue that the strength of my findings lies in the transferability of theory. For instance, transferability can be achieved if another researcher refers to my original integrated theoretical framework to study other visual phenomenon. As well, meaning categories, such as phenomenological themes and interpretive positions underlying residents' perceptions of cultural sustainability, that is, the perceived attributes, can be transferred as evaluative criteria, especially to settings that have Chinese populations.

Dependability. Instead of insisting that others get the same result as the original research in quantitative studies, the goal of dependability is to show that results of qualitative research are consistent with the data collected, hence the results are dependable.

Dependability is conceptualized to mean *reliability*, which refers to the extent to which research findings can be replicated in quantitative research. Guba (1981, 86) interprets dependability as a concept that embraces the stability of data and also makes allowance for instability that arises from different sources or changes in instrumentation. He suggests using "overlap methods" (86) to ensure dependability; it was a measure taken in my inquiry.

A qualitative assumption that my inquiry builds on is that there are different realities regarding the visual phenomenon as perceived by different participating residents; thus its results tend to vary. However, instabilities of data are also meaningful because they reflect the influence of different types of visuals or different interpretive positions. Measures taken to increase dependability of my inquiry include multi-site design (two-sites, multiple estates); multiple methods, integration of resident's reading and expert reading. These overlap methods are complementary in terms of drawing responses through different ways to maintain some consistency. While these procedures can be repeated by another qualitative researcher, the outcomes may not be as stable. However, it is exactly the variant insights and sensitivities emerging from that context that characterizes the inquiry.

Confirmability. One looks for objectivity, neutrality or elimination of bias in

quantitative studies. But in qualitative studies, interpretation of data is inevitably biased given the researcher's "natural subjectivity" (Marshall & Ross 1994, 194). To deal with this issue, Guba (1981) proposes a shift from investigator objectivity to data confirmability (87). That is, showing data and findings of an inquiry as a function of the participant, and of the particular conditions that brings about the responses. Two techniques are suggested: triangulation and practicing reflexivity. The latter is to intentionally reveal a researcher's underlying assumptions which cause the formulation of questions and presentation of findings in a particular way (Ruby 1980 in Guba 1981, 87).

My inquiry achieved triangulation in various forms. I also practiced reflexivity through the procedure of bracketing by exposing my underlying assumptions in regard to the studied phenomenon and its contextual distinctiveness. It involved some introspection, critical self-reflection, setting aside prejudgment, maintaining a consciousness of own presuppositions, and documenting shifts and changes in my orientation as I entered the field. They are openly and generously presented through the dissertation to confirm, and in support of, the interpretations I made of the data collected.

Ethical considerations. The steps mentioned above are taken to meet the set of criteria for evaluating the trustworthiness of my inquiry. Among them, triangulation – gathering data from a variety of perspectives, using a variety of methods, and drawing upon a variety of sources – has been the main technique. Doing so, in order to ensure validity, involves my ethical considerations because validity is in itself an ethical question (Lincoln 1995). My awareness of the issue is reflected also by maintaining good researcher-participant relationship, obtaining informed consent, and doing necessary things to protect the privacy of participants, such as changing names of participating residents for confidentiality. Ultimately, I want to persuade readers that the results can be trusted, for I have conducted my qualitative communication research in a rigorous, systematic and ethical manner.

PART IV
RESULTS

Presenting qualitative findings

Writing qualitative research findings is not a separate activity but the continuation of interweaving analytic and interpretive processes. Beginning with bracketing prior to, and upon entering the field, followed by the on-the-spot analysis while interviewing, to the writing of a final report at this point, I strove to find meaning in all kinds of data to gain an understanding of the lived experience of residents engaged with the visual phenomenon. Bouma (1996) and Marshall (1999) recommend strategies of writing qualitative reports: to summarize, to thematize, to link summaries to theory. My research inquiry accommodates these techniques for writing the findings on the basis of my reflections, as well as on the descriptive accounts of participants.

Section 1 summarizes my reflections on the situational condition of the study estates. It represents the substance of my bracketing while incorporating insights of literature. It provides a contextual understanding of the phenomenon under study. Van Manen (1997) suggests that for bracketing, it is better to make explicit presuppositions – try to term them with our assumptions, not to forget, but to expose them deliberately. So I presented a critical self-reflection of what I perceive and think about the characteristics of the housing neighborhoods. I exposed my prior knowledge about the setting including some historical accounts. I applied my theoretical assumptions to the cultural situation of residents dealing with the phenomenon of new signage and estate art. These initial accounts of the viewing

situations set the stage for interpreting subsequent findings. They responded to the 1st subquestion: What is the situational condition of estates in which visuals are experienced, meanings are identified?

Section 2 presents some vignettes from residents' experiences in their visual environment. These reconstructed descriptions of specific participants' profiles and perceptions are extracted from interview transcripts, field notes, and my field observation of their activities. Vignettes shows us what the experience was like for residents to encounter the phenomenon on an individual basis. Section 3 summarizes some general findings such as comparing residents' responses to name signs and public art. General results serve to supplement the thematized findings that follow.

Section 4 delineates the results of the interview-based socio-semiotic analysis which unlocks how the visuals look and mean to participants. In the form of thematic organized narrative, I outlined categories of cultural codes, the aspects of meanings embodied in the designs. The codes have emerged primarily from residents' readings in response to the standardized questions, upon integration with my expert reading as a process of decoding the designers' codes. The section illuminates the 2nd subquestion, the design-oriented question regarding the cultural meanings signified by the design of name signs and public art.

Section 5 explicates results of the phenomenological analysis. These were residents' lived meanings of visual experience, that is, their understanding of their own experiences as they lived through the phenomenon. Section 8.5.1 presents a list of incidental themes. Section 8.5.2 presents the specific meanings of the total experience. These "richer" categories of lived meanings are presented as seven phenomenological themes. Incidental and phenomenological themes respectively respond to the 3rd and 4th sub-questions, the human-oriented research questions: Through what experiences do residents encounter and engage with the visual phenomenon? What is the structure of experience that constitutes their perception of cultural sustainability?

But what are the participants' interpretive positions while dealing with the phenomenon in order for a sense of cultural sustainability to emerge? This concerns the question of experiential conditions, the second type of essences that ground the total experience. Section 6 answers the 5th subquestion by presenting the 5 interpretive positions uncovered through my phenomenological reflection and interpretation of all findings acquired so far. Table 8.1 summarizes the types of findings in relation to the subsidiary research questions, incorporating the data collection and data analysis methods used to answer the questions. Together, the findings contribute to illuminating the central research questions.

Table 8.1.
Subsidiary research questions in relation to data collection methods, data analysis methods, and types of finding.

subsidiary question	data collection method	data analysis method	<i>type of finding</i>
1. What is the situational condition of housing estates in which visuals are experienced, meanings are identified?	<i>bracketing / reflective description of the researcher</i>		<i>contextual understanding of housing</i>
2. What are the cultural meanings signified by the visual design of name signs and public art?	standardized interview / pheno. description	socio-semiotic analysis	<i>7 cultural codes of visuals</i>
3. Through what experiences do residents encounter and engage with the visual phenomenon?	conversational interview / pheno. description	<i>horizontalization / pheno. reduction</i>	<i>incidental themes</i>
4. What is the structure of experience that constitutes their perception of cultural sustainability in housing community?		<i>definition / pheno. reduction</i>	<i>7 pheno. themes of experience</i>
5. What are the experiential conditions underlying residents' shared meanings and experience that make up the perception?		uncover essence / pheno. reflection	<i>5 interpretive positions</i>

The following section presents the result of my bracketing. It conceptualizes the public housing context as a rhetorical situation and housing estates as semiotic neighborhoods. It elucidates why such contextual characteristics are essential for the communication, and encouraging the perception, of attributes of cultural sustainability.

8.1 A rhetorical situation in semiotic neighborhoods



Figure 8.1

A montage of the “meaningful” environments of Hong Kong public housing estates, 2006.

To embark on my fieldwork, I returned to Hong Kong in the summer of 2006. Touring the city I found the cityscape of my hometown much altered, including the sprawling residential developments in remote areas and on newly reclaimed land; among them are numerous PRH estates. My interest was drawn to these public housing constructions, for they represent achievements of the Authority, the public sector for which I designed publicity and promotional campaigns in the 1980s.

Revisiting housing I was impressed by the visual diversity in the appearance of new developments. Contrary to the monotonous residential environments in old estates, new developments are enlivened by visual objects such as architectural signs, murals, monuments, statues, public art sculptures, public furniture, and play facilities, uniquely designed and extensively woven through residential blocks.

My response to the striking, changing faces of the homes of many low-income residents in Hong Kong led me to delve into the experiential qualities and meanings the visuals have for people living there. My curiosity drove me to re-evaluate the human implications of these visual objects in the environment especially as they relate to the communication and perception of cultural sustainability.

In June, 2006, I made some preparatory visits to the study estates in the new towns of Tung Chung and Tseung Kwan O. It was a prolonged period of strolling, watching and participating, probing and inquiring. My focus of interest in the purposive wandering and focused observation was the generous, conspicuous display of signs, sculptures, and resident interaction with the visual objects. My purpose was to get an idea of whether and how these visual objects played a role in fostering a sense of cultural sustainability for residents.

But where to start? I came with a new theoretical proposition but I was, at the same time, burdened with lots of prior knowledge about the conventional function of visual communication in the environment. My complex knowledge was acquired as a viewer, citizen, and designer once involved in designing visual communication for similar settings. My

cultural memory is filled with episodes of Hong Kong's social development in recent decades.

Different ways of utilizing the objects abound. But invisible to my sight was the “preferred usage” – aesthetic appreciation of public art, identification and orientation by public signage. Rarely did I see a passerby paying attention to, not to mention overtly appreciating, pieces of artwork. Nor did I see anyone focusing on the graphics and words inscribed on a name sign structure. Frankly, doing so would seem awkward for residents who already are too familiar with these everyday objects. But what was I to infer from their seeming indifference and ignorance? Do the visuals not playing any important role in residents' everyday life at all?

With these questions in mind, I bracketed, or suspended, my prior understanding about the informational values of name signs; I set aside the general preconception about the aesthetic function of public art – a first step taken to ensure congruence with a phenomenological approach. I held up the phenomenon for serious inspection, such that, as Moustakas (1994) describes, “phenomena are revisited, freshly, in a wide open sense . . .” (33).

Before long, I reckoned that it was a culturally-fashioned, built environment fueled by items of visual culture (e.g. signs and sculptures), persons (e.g. residents, storekeepers), and social actions (e.g. Tai Chi class, morning exercise, badminton games, elderly chatting in groups, toddlers make their way through sculptural forms playing hide-and-seek, kids posing for photographs against story-telling murals). From what I observed initially, I came to realize that people's engagement with their visual environment is a cultural process not simply a visual process. By “cultural” I mean that it is meaningful for them – to spend time integrating themselves into their visual environment. But what is the potential of the visual meanings in their lives?

Further in the field, I continued to engage in the reflective process of bracketing. I began to interview people, to probe their lived experience descriptions of encountering the phenomenon. I tried to balance all views – those in the literature, of my participants, and of mine, while taking into consideration the contextual particularity. The critical analysis affirms

my new way of looking at the design-human relationship – not in terms of the visual quality or designated informational or aesthetic function, but in light of the group of communication theories I brought to the study – rhetoric, semiotics, and phenomenology. I make a claim: here in the housing estates, it is a “rhetoric situation” within “semiotic neighborhoods.” Only under these contextual circumstances can the communication and perception of cultural sustainability become possible. In the following I integrated references from literature with my reflective interpretation in support of this claim.

8.1.1 An “exigence” in housing

To conceive of the visual phenomenon of new signage and estate art as visual rhetoric, or rhetorical discourse, it was necessary to first establish the related viewing and experiential context as rhetorical situation. A situational perspective can avoid de-contextualizing the phenomenon from the particular situation that prompted their creation. What then, is particular about the kind of situation in my study estates that has called the phenomenon into existence? In the following I explore the ‘rhetorical situation’ in Housing context using the key components, “exigence,” “audience,” and “constraint,” as defined by Bitzer (1968). These concepts are linked to the cultural issues the Authority is responding to.

A rhetorical situation is marked by three constituent elements: (1) an exigence – an imperfection marked by urgency; something waiting to be done; that which capable of positive modifications by discourse, (2) an audience – consists only of those persons who are capable of being influenced by discourse (Herrick 2001), and (3) constraints – factors that might restrict on or limit the rhetorical power of discourse (Bitzer in Herrick). Two implications are central to this relation: first, it is the situation that calls the rhetorical discourse into existence; second, rhetorical discourse is like a moral action because its creation is some kind of positive response to that defective situation.

The “exigence” and the “rhetorical audience.” As revealed in data,⁶⁶ the Authority’s perception of an exigence in the estates points to the cultural and psychological needs of people settling in new developments. They can be distinguished as under a sort of socio-psychological anxiety in consequence of their relocation and resettlement into current residential settings. Under this circumstance, residents may suffer from a sense of alienation resulting from a now absent cultural milieu or from aspiring for a prospering future, yet to be fulfilled. This is the exigence, or the rhetorical situation, that prompted the creation of a visual rhetoric. The provision of name signs and public art encoded with intended meaning through design appears to be a new initiative, a response to relieve the perceived anxiety. The phenomenon persuades by way of providing audiences with the visual resources for meaning-making – for affording individual reminiscence or collective remembrance or to express aspirations and evoke pleasure.

While it must be recognized that not all audiences of the phenomenon are rhetorical – only local residents are, for their propensity to be influenced, which is built upon their particular circumstances that differ from those of visitors to the estates. A brief review of their residential background is useful here.

The two research sites are reclaimed land or former paddy fields and traditional fishing villages. The development of Tung Chung into a new town is associated with the construction of the new Hong Kong International Airport. The once quiet fishing village was developed into a new “gateway town.” Tseung Kwan O is a rural district closer to the city. In the 2000s more public housing was built on the sites to relieve the congested living environment in urban areas, as well as to resettle people from local rural areas.

Thus, a large percentage of residents of the estates were relocated from older districts as a result of urban renewal and are indigenous habitants resettled from the

⁶⁶ A number of publicity materials reveal the Authority’s intention to “reflect and echo the local history and cultural features by artistic interpretation,” which possibly arose from such a perception.

traditional fishing villages of Tung Chung and Tseung Kwan O. Relocated people and villagers in particular, have left their native houses to live in high rise buildings. Clearly they have a better physical living place now, but they also faced drastic changes in their lives in having to cope with a new environment. Some miss their old communities and memories they left behind. Relocation or resettlement disrupted not only the living pattern to which residents have become habituated, but also their community attachments.

Visual rhetoric as a means of positive modification. While an exigence induces a rhetorical discourse, Bitzer indicates, a discourse without aiming to modify a defective situation is not rhetoric. Presumably, the Authority takes on a cultural policy, by which the design of name signs and sculptures is encouraged to adopt themes that reflect traditions, heritage of local culture, or the future, promoting new images, depicting affluence, prosperity and innovation. One can find sculpture of an analogical nature evoking the past, or name signs of innovative approach suggesting the rising expectations of the community. The nature of the design objectives is somewhat like the attributes of cultural sustainability. The visual rhetoric strives to make a positive modification to a defective situation that focuses on the perceived cultural needs of residents.

The purpose of the rhetoric is documented in the Authority's promotion literature, "to embody the community's spirit and the aspiration of sharing . . . reflecting the history and cultural heritage . . . to strengthen the sense of belonging."⁶⁷ According to Bitzer's theory, I see this as a moral action because it aims to eliminate the uneasy sentiment of residents. I consider the rhetoric an ethical function of visual design: name signs and sculptures that are instrumentally, or politically, designed for the realization of cultural intention to communicate meanings of value to residents – a "fitting response" (Herrick 230).

Constraints. However, the cultural vision represented in visual objects is not concrete measure that may solve cultural problem. Positive meaning making on the side of

⁶⁷ *Public Art Walking Tour Map*, Art Promotion Office, Hong Kong, 2004.

the rhetorical audience depends on an audience belief that is supported by available evidence for that belief. Depiction of better status or quality of life is possible only if the community advances, or economy progresses within the socio-cultural context. It is not surprising that the rhetorical situation also exhibits constraints of different kinds. For example, the lack of interpretive or imaginative abilities in residents, the absence of favorable external forces such as a good economy and political stability – all may limit the rhetorical power of the phenomenon in the semiotic neighborhoods.

8.1.2 Estates as semiotic neighborhoods

Koskinen (2005) describes the notion of “semiotic neighborhood.” He contends that this type of neighborhood has many economic functions in cities: supplying people with goods, services and experiences with which they may construe identities, attract tourism, or become an important element in building the city’s image. Three necessary conditions have to be met to be called a semiotic neighborhood: (1) the distribution of sophisticated semiotic goods has to concentrate in these areas, (2) the concentration has to be dense enough to give the area a special look and feel, and (3) these areas have to be written into popular imagination and have media coverage (Koskinen, 16).

But semiotics does not exist merely in economic environments. I applied Koskinen’s idea in the cultural environment of my study estates – I consider them being “semiotized.” The label of semiotic neighborhoods suggests that there are values in these neighborhoods that are based on the meanings people give them, rather than based on utilitarian and aesthetic functionality. Among others, the neighborhoods of Kin Ming Estate, Sheung Tak Estate, and Yat Tung Estate, have met Koskinen’s semiotic criteria, analyzed as followed:

Concentration and density. In the overview chapter, I speak of the prevalence of name signs and public art in housing. Although these visual objects can be found in many PRH estates across Hong Kong, not every such area could be established as a semiotic neighborhood; only where “semiotic objects” are really concentrated and densely installed to the extent that they constitute a phenomenon like that of new signage or estate art.

The image of King Ming Estate and Sheung Tak Estate stands out. Their adoption of bold and innovative signage is refreshing, much of it comparable to that of private homes in Hong Kong’s expensive districts. Name signs here are positioned generously around the neighborhood – children’s playground, elevator lobby, estate entrance, or podium. They are freestanding, or on the wall, located just about everywhere. They incorporate motifs such as fish, birds, sun, moon, and galaxy, and are constructed out of new materials – bent acrylic sheet, painted stainless steel.

In Yat Tung Estate, 16 art pieces in stage I, ten in stage II, are rather densely scattered along covered walkways, at resting places, between staircases or amid planters; the distance between two sculptures is usually one to two blocks. Their distribution is concentrated, making them easily accessible to anyone moving around the neighborhood. The dense concentrations of visual objects give the estates a special appearance and atmosphere, thus meeting the first and second conditions of a semiotic neighborhood.

Publicity. The third requirement for being a semiotic neighborhood concerns recognition in cultural publications or maps. I found such instances in the estates. As a matter of fact, environmental design of Sheung Tak Est. is emphatically featured in the Authority’s 1999 Annual Report for its unique visual appeal. That an overseas design consultant was commissioned to do the color work was written into publication as well. Likewise, for the artwork in Yat Tung Estate, there is no lack of publicity. In a promotional pamphlet,⁶⁸ the historical and geographical background of Tung Chung Estate and Yat Tung Estate is

⁶⁸ *Public Art Walking Tour Map*. Art Promotion Office, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. 2004.

provided. Pictures and descriptions of all displayed sculptures and locations of individual artwork are included. Similar content also appeared in the 2006 July-Sept issue of *Art Promotion Office Newsletter*. Such publicity marks the neighborhoods culturally, gaining them their semiotic quality.

8.1.3 Situational condition

Evidently a rhetorical situation exists in my study context wherein some cultural needs are being addressed. Through the provision of environmental objects, a visual rhetoric is developed that fits a cultural setting in which residents' memories of previous life experiences and future aspirations are called for. My observation and analysis shows that the Authority recognizes this as the exigence, that the connection between visual design as "the instrument of modification" and the exigence is substantiated.

At this time, I realize that it is not necessary for a resident to give full attention to a sign or a sculpture in order to derive meaning from its presence. Environmental objects, in a rhetorical situation, can subtly convey a message by creating a mood, an impression of meaning, or feeling of atmosphere to their particular rhetorical audience. And the audience can connect to the objects in their unique ways.

That the estates constitute semiotic neighborhoods is plausible given the proliferation and dominance of signs and sculptures around the areas, fulfilling Koskinen's three criteria of a semiotic neighborhood: concentration, density and publicity. Being semiotic, the neighborhoods and the visuals contained are taken as system of signs. Visual signs embody meanings of cultural significance that come from the context and from the physical (or mental) activities residents have with the objects.

A rhetorical situation in semiotic neighborhoods gives rise to a visual rhetoric that is created with the good intention to respond to perceived cultural needs. I argue that it is a

moral action since the communicated values are beneficial to members of the community, culturally. In sum, the current section distinguishes the nature of the viewing situation, a condition required for the communication of cultural sustainability. It also provides a reasonable backdrop against which to consider the experience of specific participants.

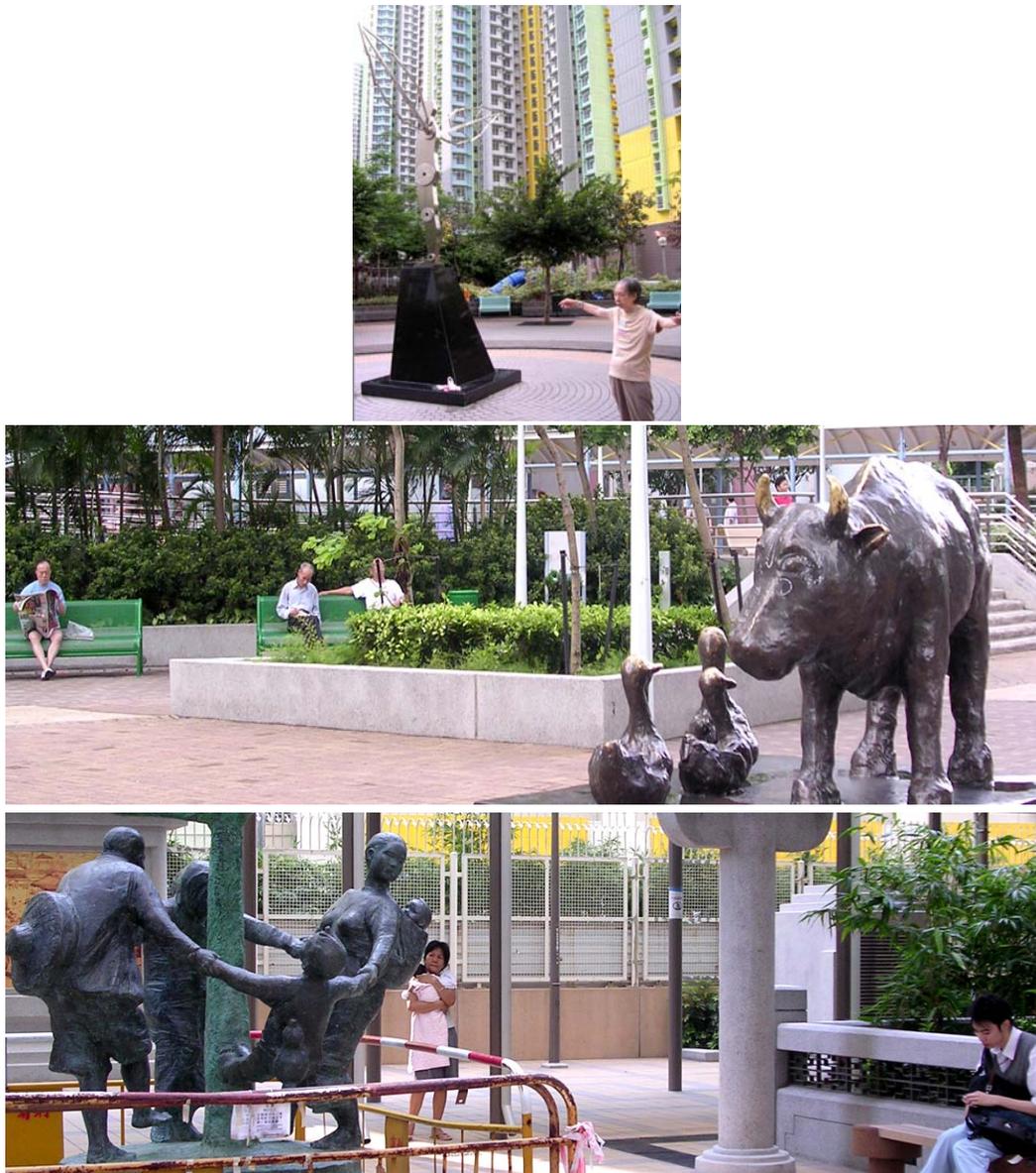


Figure 8.2

A montage of the subtle interaction between public art and their “rhetorical audience.”

8.2 Vignettes of participants

Recognizing that an abstract conception must be substantiated by concrete cases, in this section, I offer my reconstructed descriptions of the profiles of some interview participants. In the summer of 2006, I interviewed 31 out of the 38 residents contacted. There are 26 successful cases including 14 males and 12 females. Six of them are elderly, 10 categorized as “workers,” belonging to the workforce of different occupations, 4 housewives and 6 students ranging from age 13 to 19. In a phenomenological study, it is customary to provide full-bodied construction of all actors. For my study, which has a semiotic element and uses aggregated samples for a systematic understanding of residents’ meanings and experiences, it is not necessary. Nor it is feasible because of space limitations. So out of the 26 cases, I chronicled 9 interviewees’ characteristics and experience as examples for referencing about the kind of circumstances that give rise to their thoughts and feelings.

I structured the descriptions as vignettes of participants. A vignette begins with a profile created of the person, followed by a portrayal of the individual’s physical viewing situation and activity, if appropriate. A glimpse of their thinking and concepts, arising from their everyday routine, including encounters with visual objects, is provided when available. Fictitious common Chinese names are used in place of the real names of participants, who are numbered by order of interview with the site name where the interview was conducted. Thus [1-TC] indicates participant 1, Tung Chung; [4-TKO] participant 4, Tseung Kwan O.

Cheung Ba [1-TC]

Cheung Ba is in his 70s. He was carrying some vegetables in supermarket bags and a big sack of rice over his shoulder when I met him on a passageway between two residence blocks in Yat Tung Est. Looked exhausted, he stopped to regain his breath, resting

on a bench by the edge of a planter, and grabbed a banana out of the bag. I felt it was a good time to approach him. I introduced myself and asked if I could conduct an interview with him about the environment of his estate. He kindly agreed and invited me to sit down.

A retired factory owner, Cheung Ba used to run a small-scale garment factory, typical of Hong Kong's thriving manufacturing industry in the 1960s. He acted like many local elderly, especially male – outspoken, keen on expressing his opinions of current social affairs, from the political state of Middle East to local TV entertainment news. The “critic” enjoyed freedom of speech, which he described as part of his satisfaction of post-1997 life. He appeared to be quite money-minded – not only sensitive to stock market fluctuations but to a peculiar money association with a sculpture in which the topic is simply animals (see 8.4.1). From a beautiful visual environment he envisioned a promising economic future, a “much much better” condition now for how people live their lives. He felt that what was given [by the Authority] visually indicated stability and prosperity, not only within housing but also in the larger society. He showed a great sense of attachment to his neighborhood.

Mr. Yau [2-TC]

Mr. Yau lives and works in Yat Tung Est. He ran a tea shop at the attached commercial complex. His business involved importing bulk tea leaves from China for wholesale and retail. For this, he traveled a lot between Hong Kong and the Mainland.⁶⁹ The talkative middle-age merchant expressed a high degree of residential satisfaction given his allocation of a flat, as well as being lucky enough to rent a commercial unit in the same development. Regarding the name signs and public art, he enjoyed having them around, but not as much as his 13-yrs-old daughter did.

⁶⁹ Even though Hong Kong is now part of China, the locals are accustomed to call China as the Mainland – mainland China versus Hong Kong which is a southern coastal city.

His favorite sculptures were those prestigious looking ones – tall, imposing, glossy surfaced objects such as PA1 and PA7. He felt the visual display gave his estate a “higher” image. He felt that his dwelling was not only “more good-looking,” but “more cultural” and “artistic.” I also met Mrs. Yau, who assisted her husband at the store. A typical rural woman in her 40s, quiet and submissive, she only talked business, explaining to me how flower herb tea could be good for my health. As I attempted interview her she refused, saying that she has no opinion about what the Authority put in the open space.

Siu Fun [3-TC]

The only daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Yau, Siu Fun, was most excited and expressive when asked about “those playthings at my playground.” She went to the nearby primary school. Her favorite class was physical education. She liked dancing but never got much chance to do it. Mrs. Yau had Siu Fun walk home by herself after school because their residential block was just five minutes away. However, the mother complained that it sometimes took the girl 30 minutes to show up at their 35th floor apartment. Siu Fun confessed that she played a bit, visiting some of her favorite “playthings” – the sculptural objects – before returning home.

She connected every sculpture with the concept of “climbing.” Obviously, she had perceptually converted the art objects into recreational, play-related objects, something she could physically have fun with. She attempted to climb each single sculpture in her “playground.” PA16 was her favorite because “it’s like a huge puzzle . . . wanting to break the pieces down and put them back . . . it must be fun!” – indicating her adventurous mind.

Mrs. Wong [4-TKO]

The Wong family used to live in Yau Yu Wan, a fishing village in Sai Kung. To make way for the redevelopment of coastal Sai Kung, many of its original inhabitants were resettled. In 2004, the family of four was allocated a rental flat of some 40 square meters⁷⁰ in one of the high rise blocks of Kin Ming Estate not far away from their village. The attractive appearance of the residential surrounding had delighted the family ever since their first visit to their future home prior to moving in. As they arrived at the still under-construction site, capturing their sight were the brightly colored exterior walls of blocks, beautiful landscaped grounds, and variety of play equipment freshly painted. Among them, vividly designed directional signs and estate name signs caught their attention. Mrs. Wong felt privileged even before seeing the interior setting of her very own apartment up on the 18th floor of Ming Sing House.

Mrs. Wong was a middle-age, barely educated woman; daughter of boat people, typical of Sai Kung village households. Two sons of nine and twelve went to school in the new town. It was 10 o'clock in the morning. Mrs. Wong finished her laundry and left home for grocery shopping. Stepping out of the lift lobby, the sign with colorful bold type "Kin Ming Estate" came into sight; it was designed as a banner vividly flying in the air. Having grabbed a few vegetables, bought a freshwater fish, Mrs. Wong also "chopped" a catty of roasted pork from a barbecue restaurant before joining her women neighbors at the roof garden.

It was at the "Gaudi bench" at the podium where I interviewed Mrs. Wong and learned about her background. (See figure 8.3.) The bench was a curved concrete sitting structure adorned with colored tiles arranged in mosaic patterns, an imitation of Barcelona architect Gaudi's work. I asked Mrs. Wong to describe her feelings seeing the many different signs around her estate. She called her name sign as "the flag . . . like in fairs and festival celebration . . ." She took pleasure enjoying her visual environment "so bright and colorful."

⁷⁰ One square meter = 10.76 square feet.



Figure 8.3

A group of housewives gather at the podium of Kin Ming Estate where public furniture brightens up their visual environment, and their spirit.

Helen [6-TC]

Helen was a shop sales worker at a department store in Kowloon Bay. She is a young working mother with a 2-year-old son, who was baby sat by a neighbor during weekdays. It was a Sunday morning when I approached her at the estate plaza. She carried an animal-faced fabric backpack believed to be holding diapers and baby stuff. Mother and son were playing hide-and-seek in a sculpture (PA15) in the middle of the plaza, near the entrance to the wet market. I determined this as an interesting case and solicited her to be a participant. She gave her consent but was unable to sit down to talk, having to chase behind the toddler.

Helen never finished high school. She quit at Form Four (high school, junior year) when her father passed away and she married a machine operator at a young age. The family

moved to Yat Tung Estate three years ago. Helen was pleasant and outgoing, fond of trendy outfits; she spoke of her ambition to begin her own handbag manufacturing business when the toddler goes to school soon. Helen was a stereotype of Hong Kong individuals who think modern and seek admiration from others, by means of the public art sculptures. She expressed her changing housing experience and a better social image she believed to have been brought about by the “beautiful and meaningful” surrounding visuals. She wanted to get rid of old gloomy remembrances of her previous dwellings and to create new memory with her son in a pleasant environment.



Figure 8.4
Mother and son playing hide-and-seek in Yat Tung Estate.

Mrs. Fong [7-TC]

Mrs. Fong is 39 yrs. old. She was bottle-feeding her baby girl on a garden bench when I approached her on a humid summer morning typical of Hong Kong’s sub-tropical

climate. Her husband, an electrician, had gone to work in the city, the Hong Kong Island. The once remote working place was conveniently connected by MTR (Mass Transit Railway) to Tung Chung. The young couple also has a 7-year-old son named Ming Tsai who goes to primary two. Her pair of children, a boy and a girl, make up what traditional Chinese perceive as the perfect combination of one's offspring.

Mrs. Fong admitted that it's a blessing, but that reality was harsh – living on one income was about living on lean budget. The tension of survival remained after moving to the estate, and yet, she was contented with her life there. Instead of feeling anxious about dealing with a new environment she enjoyed its novelty and the joyful feelings her pleasant environment sometimes give her. She expressed a sense of belonging to her community. She felt that it was a good place to raise her children; in fact, she tried to cultivate her son through the many “creative art” and “interesting designs” just around every corner of her estate surroundings. She observed the visual dynamics created by the name signs and sculptures, agreeing that “they enhance the vitality of my neighborhood.”

Miss Ting [8-TC]

In the open space of Yat Tung Est., a young teacher was out on a fieldtrip with 10 school children to visit the public art sculptures along the “sculpture walk.” It was Miss Ting, one of my interviewees. She was a certified teacher,⁷¹ an open-minded, eloquent young woman and a second-generation public housing resident. Her family's limited income entitled her to continue occupying a flat in this newly constructed estate. She applied for transfer to a local school so that she could be close to home. Miss Ting had taught in primary schools for many years, yet there was little hope for career advancement.

⁷¹ In Hong Kong, a “certified teacher” graduates from a college of education with a teaching certificate, versus a “graduate teacher” who holds a university degree.



Figure 8.5
School kids pose for a group photo in front of a mural in Yat Tung Estate.

Despite this, she appeared to be knowledgeable. She made use of visual stories inscribed in the sculptures and murals as her teaching aids, explaining history and Chinese cultural heritage to the kids. During our interview, she showed interest in all kinds of designs; she was receptive to traditional or innovative, realistic or abstract works. I considered her mentality that of a “Modern Chinese,” one who “retains the essential Chinese virtues in a creative amalgam with Western technical mastery.”⁷² She even examined the photographs of some name signs and sculptures not on location. She recognized the necessary harmonious integration of art and technology, of the East and the West.

Talking about her lived experience of the design and art objects, Miss Ting showed great joy; in particular, she was keen on relating the signs and sculptures to the self.

⁷² Among the five clusters of Hong Kong population is “modern Chinese.” Others include “traditional Chinese,” “middle-middle,” “modern-Western” and “traditional-middle.” Martin et al. 1994a in Martin 1996.

Engaging with the visuals primarily meant provoking her aspirations to become better. She felt strongly the desire for living in public housing with a “better image,” if not “higher status.” She spoke of self-enrichment, inspired by what she called “spirit of new Tung Chung” depicted by the visuals. Miss Ting made an “information-rich” participant.

Ah Man [10-TKO]

Forty-two years old, Ah Man was a cook who worked at a Chinese seafood restaurant in the Tung Chung MTR shopping mall. In his youth, he was a gambler, betting on mahjong, horseracing, going to casinos in Macao; he dreamed of the sophisticated life of a big gambler. He did not make big money; rather he lost all his savings and had to become a kitchen helper. Just a few years ago, Ah Man married his wife, a much younger woman from Mainland China, met through a matchmaker. They later moved in Kin Ming Est.

As I approached him, he was taking his baby out for a walk. It was his day off, but his wife had to work (as a cleaning lady at the same restaurant). When asked about his perception of the meanings of the many new signs in public housing, Ah Man exhibited mixed feelings – “just a signboard . . . I don’t care . . . well . . . but it is always better to have a sign that looks smart.” He is very “realistic” money-wise, in the terms of the Hongkonger; he insisted that the high cost of making good looking signs was “a total waste of money.” But he became less critical when commenting on his own estate name sign which he praised for the “smartness” it brought to the image of his estate.

Luk Ba [22-TC]

Luk Ba retired from a textile dyeing factory in the 1990s when most local factories either closed down or moved northward to new locations in China. His long retiring

life had involved by gambling – from domestic mahjong playing to Mark Six lottery, to the recent football betting; horseracing betting was big time for him. The elderly man mentioned that he had refused to relocate to the current estate, because that would separate him from his “social network” established in his old district where he gathered with other men, displaying and comparing their songbirds kept in cages. Settling down, he felt much better.

Living with his sick wife in a small flat in the estate, he spent much of the day on the garden bench, still displaying his birds in the teak cage while studying newspapers for horse racing tips. He thought of the public art sculpture (PA5), featuring some citrus fruits over a blue jean-like structure, as bringing him good luck. “Every time before I go betting, I touch the ‘Tai Kut’ for luck . . . well . . . it seems to work . . .” It has become a ritual for him to do so. The special auspicious meanings Luk Ba associated with the sculpture reveals the visual manifestation of cultural values by environmental objects.

According to Patton (2002), the phenomenological interview opens up the possibility that more information will be collected from some people than from others. True to my study, the above reconstructed descriptions of portrayed participants are relatively information-rich. They are chosen also because backgrounds, voices and thoughts are typical of the social groups they belong to. In fact, some reported perceptions that seem representative of some “analytic claim” (Lindlof 1995, 264) – for example, Miss Ting’s embrace of the concept of diversity and creativity which is reflected in many designs. Vignettes with individuals’ profiles have some specifics to differentiate each person yet they have some generalities too to infer to the typical stratum of residents. A full list with demographics of all participants is included in appendix B.

8.3 General results

With specific participants’ profiles portrayed, it is also appropriate to refer to

some general results that may increase understanding of the total phenomenon. More interesting characteristics of participants are worth noting. Typically, public housing residents are of low socio-economic status. The educational level among older participants is generally low. Nevertheless, many elderly are wise and very articulate. My observation is that elderly men are more talkative and expressive than elderly women. Reflected in ways they respond, retired men tend to demonstrate authoritativeness in speaking their opinions, for instance about what they thought were the right or wrong doings of the Authority. They used terms like “this is my own estate,” always taking a strong stand – “no problem about its [the environmental objects] value to improving our standing!”

Conversely, some rural women felt reluctant to comment on the designs, on abstract artworks in particular. With shyness they regard themselves as “having no culture;” they thought of the visual objects as “art,” which in their view is “high,” beyond their “knowing” for they had “no school.” But the submissiveness did not prevent them from undertaking “aesthetic appreciation,” though unconsciously – they reported taking pleasure everyday as they go by “the art” although “I don’t know why.”

Moreover, there was a temporal dimension in people’s perception – they tended to compare the name signs in the current estate with those in their previous dwellings. It involved a recollection of past experiences during their life cycle and assessment of the status quo. The majority of participants were satisfied, admitting that it was a much more attractive and pleasant environment, that the “differently-looking” signs, “expensive art,” “smart design” and “new style design” revitalize their estates and their “mood.” Partly due to the visual dynamics, it was also reflective of residents’ conformity to the Authority’s policy to see the design as “improving” their environment. Some appeared appreciative of the Authority’s “good work.”

When asked about their favorite visual objects, most people preferred figurative / realistic representations to abstract sculpture designs. Sign structures made out of steel and

bronze were better-liked than those using concrete or acrylic materials. They gave the reason as the sense of “advancement” implied by the construction and design. Moreover, people were more enthusiastic in elaborating on their associations with three-dimensional structures than with graphic representations. This has much to do with the imposing scale of some structures, the wealth of connotations in abstract forms, and the fact that they have seen enough of “written signs” previously in older estates.

Traditional as well as innovative designs found their admirers. Middle-age housewives had affection for works that depict traditions, because they are likely to conjure up a warm remembrance of the past. Youngsters were fascinated by innovative forms, which they described imaginatively. When probed for in-depth descriptions of visual experiences, people usually chose to describe favorite objects, whereas their favorites are usually from their own estate.

Overall, few were critical about the visual display. None thought of the signs or sculptures as ugly invasions to their surroundings. Many understood that the installation of new signs and public art was a part of the site development but some would rather have had roller-skating field or basketball pitch built where the public art stands. This was frequently reported by high school students.

On name signs. My participants “read” and talked about the signs at two levels. One level inevitably involved the pragmatic aspect, the identification and orientation functions of the sign structures. The other level concerned meanings – the associations they made with the designs. My analysis reveals that most people found no problem processing the linguistic information, which usually included only the estate name. But people came up with layers of meanings in response to variations in the graphic representations, design forms, structures, scale, and material used to fabricate the physical forms.

An example that stands out concerns the visual image of “tree,” a formal element of a name sign design. For some participants, it brought to mind something other than

“greenery” or “nature” – it symbolized “quality of life.” Due to land scarcity, much of Hong Kong is packed with innumerable high-rises, commercial and residential, hence it is called a “concrete jungle.” A woman suggested the idea and then related, “. . . only good living environments can have more beautiful trees, here we have a lot!’ It became obvious why the tree image on her estate sign, and the vegetation, landscaped gardens made her feel like she lived in an “up-market living environment” in her low cost housing neighborhood. It also occurred to me that the associated meaning had built on an expectation for greater prosperity.

On public art. Unlike signs, public art, by definition, does not carry a utilitarian purpose. Noticeably, participants placed equal concern on both the aesthetics⁷³ and the social aspects of the artworks. Sculptures were perceived as artistically designed, pleasant looking. Many regarded them as “meaningful, memorable.” The beauty of the artwork, in their view, enhanced their attachment to the community. Besides, there was a non-functional aspect of sculptures that was unique to the context. “I like to show my kids what we did when we were small” – statements like this were reflective of some educational purpose, with which parents identified, usually through some realistic depiction. In dealing with abstract forms, some were confronted with what Ball (1998) calls “visual interpretive enigma” (136) – they could not decide on the meaning, although there were imaginative interpretations from younger residents.

Apparently, sculpture delivered more messages than signs because of its various forms of representation – figurative, abstract, meanings were sophisticated and context-dependent. Abstract and animal statues appeared to generate more culturally-driven meanings; human statues, whether realistic or abstract, provoked personal reflection.

Visual/verbal aspects of design. Searching for the meanings of design, I meant to emphasize their visual (the pictorial, figurative, image and graphic) and verbal (the title of a

⁷³ Aesthetics is referred here to “formal aesthetics” – combination of the shapes, rhythms, complexities, features and properties of visuals.

sculpture, the name of an estate) aspects working as a whole. In the interviews, I did not draw participants' attention to the verbal/linguistic dimensions of the visual forms. A few older people believed that the verbal meanings of names or titles mattered – they demanded names that have auspicious connotations. Overall, however, the verbal aspect of the design did not appear significant in shaping interpretation. Rather, most people were inclined to treat the verbal elements as if they were visual because the names themselves usually faithfully adopted existing area names. As a result, people's attention was drawn to the visual expression, the stylized form, rather than the literal meanings of words.

This section is a brief general preview. It represents just a small portion of the findings. Major analytic results, the whole range of meanings and experiences that have encouraged residents' perception of attributes of cultural sustainability – the total experience – are presented systematically as thematized findings in subsequent sections.

8.4 Cultural meanings of visual objects

By cultural meanings I refer to residents' interpretations of design features (actual elements and objective properties) of the environmental objects within their socio-cultural context. It is what visually appeared to them; the objective reality of name signs and public art to which they responded. But the emerging layers of connotations flowed from the wider social context, such as media and advertising, and the everyday context of human-visual interactions on the sites. Cultural meanings are the design-oriented, context-bound, socially grounded and culturally specific associations of the design objects. They are public, local and multiple – evidence of cultural phenomena, related to but different from the lived meanings of personal visual experience. The latter, though affected by cultural meanings, are people-oriented, grounded in individuals' dispositions and their historical background, and thus, have more personal significance.

8.4.1 Seven cultural codes

Through socio-semiotic analysis I distinguished a set of cultural codes on the basis of the most frequently mentioned cultural meanings of the different designs. Codes correspond to the design or rhetorical themes visually portrayed in signs and public art, representing cultural preferences and socially sustained concepts; they are values underpinning the community. I structured each category of code with a name, brief definition, and typical design motifs or construction materials associated with the code. I also referred to things and ideas embraced by the society that are the sources of meanings and basis of influence over the value system held by the average housing residents. Code descriptions are illustrated by direct quotes extracted from interview transcripts as necessary. A naming system is adopted to represent the specific visuals mentioned: name sign 1 is indicated as NS1, public art 2 as PA2, and so forth.

Innovative hi-tech code

The code of innovative hi-tech reflects many participants' favorable preferences for the structure and surface finishes of name signs or public art that take on a modern, inventive, futuristic look. In Brummet's (1999) term, these objects feature "machine aesthetics" – visual beauty embodied in forms made from materials such as metal, iron, brass, aluminum, or glass, or plastic. The theme pervaded a majority of the visual designs. Some participants mentioned that name signs and sculptures constructed out of brushed stainless steel evoked a sense of innovation, modernization, and advancement – somewhat "hi-tech" in their cultural vocabulary. These meanings were produced through the use of geometrical, mechanical elements, as opposed to organic, natural elements.

It was the belief of many locals that the adoption of machine aesthetics in urban design and architecture symbolizes the progress and innovation of the city. In the early 80s, Norman Foster's skyscraper commercial office tower for Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank marked a big event to the general public, as to architectural design. Hong Kong people, since then, have boasted of having the world's best-known building in the heart of our business district in Central. The building is made of steel frame and glass structure in a hi-tech modern style. The remarkable visual manifestation of modern technology and innovation is in close physical proximity to everybody – its cultural impact on the locals is immense and extensive.

Participants tended to relate the territories' booming economy to the adoption of innovative ideas applied to a cultural process or cultural form. "Innovative" and "hi-tech" are buzz words circulating in all walks of life. Unsurprisingly, the terms gained popularity in public housing community. The impact of external forces on people's interpretation of the visual phenomenon is clear. The Chinese cook Ah Man said, "You see, glass-wall skyscrapers are everywhere, they are so hi-tech, business is looking good . . . many foreign money invested here . . ." [10-TKO].

Such is the ideology that molds residents' meanings of the visual objects. In their view, innovative, imaginative designs are associated with the values of progress and prosperity. Examples are NS2 and NS5. Names signs made of solid shiny metal bar are among the favorites, for they stand for "revolutionary, original, creative, novel, fresh, state-of-the-art" ideas; "something we must go for now. . ." claimed Uncle Kuen [9-TKO].

Poetic nostalgia code

This distinct cultural code recreates a sentimental longing for the lost, indigenous rural community life. Examples of its material expression are PA2, PA10, and PA6. The latter portrays members of a farmer's family holding hands, joyfully dancing as they circle a tree.

The child is carrying a water container made out of a dried-squash. The man has a rattan sun-hat resting on his back. The woman has a baby strapped to her back in a traditional Chinese cloth baby carrier. One of her hands is holding that of an older woman who looks to be the grandmother. The code signifies cultural development using signifiers from people's ordinary everyday practices in the past.

I asked people what such a vivid realistic representation stood for. For many, the visual objects were associated with historical heritage, harmony, pleasure, unity, solidarity; it embodied virtues commonly held in Chinese societies. Others reported a sense of rootedness and family loyalty; the majority agreed that "solidarity and harmony within family is a Chinese virtue."

A socio-semiotic perspective decodes at the connotative level of the sign. Of interest are the associated meanings other than the depicted traditional lifestyle, which is the denotative content. A connotative reading reveals the residents' recognition of past experiences now being re-represented through artistic expression. Many showed awareness about the intention carried by the design which was to address their interest in nostalgia.

But the memories residents have for the vanished life as farmers or fishermen were not totally pleasurable, as might be argued. For hardship and poverty was typical, and diligence and frugality unavoidable, in rural living. And yet, as depicted in the design, being industrious seems legendary and lyrical – the nostalgic yearning was somewhat poetic as framed by the designer / artist. The code is labeled "poetic nostalgia" because visual objects take on the code of nostalgic sentiment in an idealistic manner. The perceived ideal of having three generations of a family "living under one roof" is no longer widely held by Hong Kong people; it is idealized in a poetic sense. As Leung (1999) notes, today's ideal home accommodates two generations in a nuclear family, with its basic components being a couple with two kids. The incompatibility of current cultural realities and idealistic depiction of the past is not at all problematic – it is a sign of social development.

Stylized or realistic sculptures show the virtues of a traditional way of life, encoded in historical figures. Some participants reported that the visual stories brought back their awareness about Chinese culture. What I noticed is that while analogical forms seem faithfully depicted social and cultural process, their connotation was more powerful at the semiotic level. For example, designs that took on the code of poetic nostalgia surprisingly inspired residents, also of progress and prosperity, goals that the culture ought to be heading for – the code exercised a semiotic function that went beyond reminiscence to evoke ambition.

Prestige / dignity code

This code signifies residents' aspirations for esteem, images of glamour and affluence. It uses as its signifiers the stately, imposing, splendid-looking material objects of name signs and sculptures. For example, in NS6, the materiality and the scale of the objects is exaggerated to create a grand sight and ambience. A participant borrowed a Chinese saying to describe his association with the huge name sign which was made of heavy marble stone, "as stable as Mount Taishan."⁷⁴ He was even imbued with a sense of dignity and majesty while seeing it [10-TKO].

In NS5 and NS12, not only do the designs look magnificent and innovative to participants, but they connote prestige, status, and expensiveness. Overall, visual objects with prestigious appeal were triggers for conceptions of human dignity and pride in oneself. As Mr. Chan related his thought about PA7, "the man [a component of the sculpture] up there looks proud and ambitious . . . we residents all should have self-respect like him . . ." [12-TC].

Unlike other codes, the code of prestige and dignity takes no cue from nature

⁷⁴ Mt. Taishan in Shandong Province is one of China's "Five Sacred Mountains." A famous saying goes, "Scaling Mt. Taishan makes one feel superior to the whole world," an example of cultural, historical basis of people's visual interpretation.

artistic or traditional heritage. Rather, the ideological code grows out entirely of the socio-cultural reality of Hong Kong, which favors the creation of prestige in many consumer products including real estate; in PRH sector there was no exception.

By definition, the demographics of PRH estates show a relative low socio-economic standing. Many residents are known to be refugees from Mainland China or their descendents. Today, some still maintain what Baker coined in the 1980s as a “refugee mentality,” “. . . highly competitive, tough for survival, quick thinking and flexible” (478). They embrace values such as industriousness and frugality. And yet, as the larger society prospers, these low-income people share some economic advantages. They aspire to look and live like the more affluent middle class, to acquire higher status and to “become better-off.” Among other aspects of their lives that seem to change, such as the patterns of consumption, visual objects in their residential environments act as material resources to manifest their aspirations, to inspire respect and admiration from others.

Naturalist delight code

This code is found in name signs and public art whose designs depict scenes and objects of nature – blue sea and green land, trees and flowers, birds and ducklings, wild geese, paddy fields – presented through figurative or abstract forms. Denotatively they signify the elements of nature, embodying some aesthetic value. Connotatively they communicate values of a more ideological nature – harmony with nature and among people – and the cultural pleasure that follows. For some participants, denotative content was less important than connotative meanings.

The multiple layers of connotative meanings that have been encoded into the visual objects strongly point to a concern for environmental protection. In Hong Kong, nature is a popular theme employed in artistic presentations in different media, as a result of

increasing local awareness of environment issues.⁷⁵ The social consciousness is reflected in NS4. The name sign unites the graphic portrayal of a scenic landscape with a three-dimensional mirror stainless steel rod. Its design denotes the coexistence of natural scenes and modern infrastructure. Its semiotics points to the conservation of Tung Chung's natural surroundings. It aims at sustaining harmony with modernist buildings in the same setting of Tung Chung which is now urbanized.

At another level, however, the code stresses the joy of nature. China is an old culture that places a value on living in harmony with nature. In Chinese philosophy, it is emphasized that “to be in harmony with nature is the happiness of Nature” (Fung 1983). The code infers an intimacy with things in nature. For instance, NS10 is a name sign structured by the naturalist delight code – the subtle use of a wooden bird juxtaposed with the Chinese name serves as the visual identity of the estate. The delight of liveliness and energy in surrounding nature is signified in the materiality of the colorful birds. By the same token, in PA4, the vividness of the bronze ducklings infers harmony and bliss in nature as much as it implies harmony and affection in human culture.

Still another level of connotation – prestige aspiration – emerged from residents' responses. To some degree, the image of a tree in the context of housing is also a symbol of status associated with the relative abundance of vegetation around up-market homes. (See discussion in 8.3.)

Artistic heritage code

An aspect of culture has to do with the way in which it acknowledges particular knowledge, skills and practices that underpin its artistic development. Architecture and the

⁷⁵ For example, the Environmental Protection Department (EPD) was expanded and restructured in 1986 to replace the Environmental Protection Unit created in 1977 as the main government body to tackle environmental issues. <http://www.epd.gov.hk>

art of calligraphy are such creative practices. The artistic heritage code characterizes an attempt by the Authority to preserve the aesthetic and artistic dimensions of classical Chinese architecture. In fact, since the 1970s there has been growing concern in Hong Kong for the preservation of historical building (Chiu 2004). In particular, the value is encoded into the design by the use of architectural details characteristic of ancient Chinese architecture.

The ideology of preserving our ancestor's creative heritage is materialized in PA17. It features the bracket system as the upper component of the sculpture. The bracket system is a unique ceiling structure in ancient Chinese architecture. In another estate, NS1 utilizes green ceramic tiles, a typical roofing material for Chinese-style buildings, as the top portion of the sign structure. More graphically, NS3 takes a sample of a decorative style window pattern from a conventional Chinese house. Visually the historical design motif is given a modernist minimal treatment; ideologically the heritage of artistic form is encoded. Revealed in data, NS3 was one of the favorites of younger residents for its modern approach, while older people choose NS1 in which the historical motif is treated without losing its original accent.

Another example is NS7. It adopts the artistic heritage code which structures its design elements – a bold metal structure features three cut-out Chinese characters in the “running script” style. The code actually characterized many older estates' name signs before the innovative style become prevalent in contemporary sign design. Except for NS7, the above mentioned visual designs use a rhetorical figure, synecdoche, through which a part is made to represent the whole; an architectural detail characterizes the artistic tradition of Chinese culture of the past. The common use of artistic heritage code in the many designs of environmental objects constitutes a text. They reinforce their respective meanings – the appreciation, reminiscence and attempted restoration of the gradually forgotten heritage.

Auspicious celebration code

This code implies good fortune and the celebration of abundance. Its associated meanings are encoded into material forms by the designer and decoded only by the ethnic Chinese. The auspicious celebration code uses as signifiers cultural objects familiar to residents; Chinese society has to be the context for sense making. For example, PA 12 has three brass-finished, oval-shape balls erected on a high stand very close to a housing block in Yat Tung Estate II. As a signifier, it stands for the concept that China is a fertile land with an abundance of produce. What seems to be an enigmatic visual form to most Westerners⁷⁶ was easily denoted by my participants. One of them, to my surprise, was a middle-age, illiterate woman, Ah Seung. Not only was she able to infer from the sculptural form three rice grains but also she quoted a Chinese proverb, “Don’t you know China is a ‘village of rice and fish?’ ” [11-TC]

On the other side of the estate is another example of public art that takes on the same code (PA5). The citrus fruit metaphor is associated with something auspicious, as my participants told me. But there is a context to this interpretation – the rhetorical situation in which resettled and relocated residents seek blessing and comfort. Required for the interpretation is a respect for tradition. The ceramic art features a surrealist composition of several tangerines over a pair of large trousers. Taken as a sign, it signifies and celebrates luck, a will for wealth, success, and prosperity. In the dialect of Cantonese, “citrus” and “auspice” are words having the same pronunciation, as are “trousers” and “fortune.”

However, it is worth noting that a socio-semiotic analysis does not regard the operation of meaning in a cultural vacuum (Gottdiener 1995). The auspicious celebration code is connected to the wider social context in which its associated meanings are appreciated. In Hong Kong, what Bond (1995 in Martin 1996, 47) calls “a deceptively

⁷⁶ It is possible that an American may identify the rice grains as three American footballs.

Western look society,” value is placed on auspiciousness. Thus, the auspicious celebration code is generated in consideration of this Hong Kong mentality. Whether perceived as a fascinating belief, a cultural heritage, or superstition, its value was held by most PRH residents. In any case, visual objects that take on the code materialize the Authority’s response to residents’ psychological needs for good fortune and the celebration of abundance.

Harmonious integration code

This code signifies the integration of various types – human-nature, rural-urban, ancient-modern, East-West – in harmony bringing together of ideas or things from diverse sources and visually manifested in signs or public art. Integration may occur at the conceptual, physical, or material levels. For example, PA7 depicts the combination of a human body and his wings which are stylized as two leaves. My participants were imaginative enough to connect its expression – design motifs and their visual arrangement – to its content. One of them was Master Lam, “Cooperation of man and nature . . . the leaves and the man . . . together in harmony” [18-TC]. For young Candy, the man was a robot man given its machine look; in this sense, it is “nature-technology integration” as Candy [13-TC] cleverly proposed.

The principle and ideal of harmony is an Oriental characteristic of life and thought, but perhaps more fully developed and implemented in China than in other traditions (Moore 1986). In the housing context, that value is placed on harmony and integration is clear, as revealed through several housewives. Ah May commented on NS1, “Chinese and Western things together . . . no problem at all . . . must be harmonious, like us people” [5-TKO].

Still, PA15 exemplifies material as well as cultural integration. Material-wise, granite as local building material was used in traditional dwellings of old Tung Chung, while

stainless steel, a modern construction material, is used widely in urban housing. The intermixing use of granite and stainless steel for the sculpture connotes rural-urban and ancient-modern integration. Again, it requires the local context for interpretation.

Above all, it is the concept of cultural integration at the human level that is most relevant to the sustainability of culture. The communication view of integration is about maintaining important parts of one's old culture as well as becoming an integral part of the new culture (Jandt 2001). The old culture, in the study context, refers to traditions and customs that characterized life in rural villages or old districts from which residents originated; the new culture, ways of going about life in the modernized community which they inhabit today.

Apparently, it takes some adaptation for incoming residents to retain old virtues while building new lifestyles, to cherish the past and to embrace the present in order for such important things in their lives to coexist in harmony. But as shown in their responses, visual objects enabled them to make an integration of a different kind in their mind. The cultural process is essential because "integration ensures a continuity of culture" (ibid., 356).

8.4.2 The signs of cultural sustainability

The set of codes emerged from my socio-semiotic analysis is not an exhaustive list of cultural values signified by the visuals. To be sure, more can be distinguished given the polysemous nature of the rhetorical-semiotic objects; but I have stopped at seven, including only those imply idealistic conceptions embraced by housing residents, and those being embodied in one or more of the 29 investigated visual objects. (See appendix A.) And certainly, the seven codes were identified as having strong relevance in encouraging residents' awareness of cultural sustainability in their housing community. Most of the objects were found to contain a mixture of several codes.

There are two main aspects to the nature of codes. First, a code structures the design – governing the designer’s choice of visual elements and visual arrangement with an intention to encode meanings of value to residents. The intended meanings are cultural values associated with ideas of cultural sustainability. And then, when codes appear as design styles and made visible, they trigger conceptions about cultural sustainability in people’s mind because those meanings embodied in design happen to be what they value. The codes will continue to define for residents, meanings or ideas and ideals that are evocative of a sense of cultural sustainability. Thus, codes are instrumental in shaping residents’ experiences that are relevant to attributes of cultural sustainability.

Visual objects are, therefore, signifiers supplying the codes, which are the signifieds. Articulation between signifiers and the signifieds constitutes the sign of cultural sustainability. Integrating findings, I present in table 8.2 a schematic of the seven codes of visual objects and their implications for the seven themes of experiences. This schematic provides a visual model to compare the variant strength of each of the codes.

8.5 Lived experience: engaging with visual objects

There is both a social and personal context to residents’ encounters with the new signage and estate art phenomena. The above findings about codes focus on the objective reality of residents with regard to meanings they assigned to visual objects which are backed up by the value system established in the social context. How about their subjective reality; residents’ understanding of their own experience seen through past conditioning in a personal context?

This section presents findings about residents’ lived experiences formed by engaging with the visual environment and results of phenomenological analysis. The various types of experiences are presented as themes. Themes, in the phenomenological sense, are

emerging meanings in life. A theme describes an aspect of the meaning of experience (Van Manen 1997). But Van Manen reminds us that not all meanings that we may encounter in reflecting on a phenomenon or experience are unique to that phenomenon or experience.

He distinguishes two types of themes associated with a phenomenon that is meaningfully experienced – incidental and phenomenological. The former portrays experience of different types, but suggests meanings of experience only at the general level; the latter is essential in terms of revealing the particular, richer, meanings that make the experience significant to a particular phenomenon.

In this dissertation, the particular phenomenon being explored is what I call the total phenomenon – the visual objects and the impact they have on people that leads to a perception of cultural sustainability. Experience of the particular phenomenon that makes up such a perception is the total experience. The “richer” categories of lived meanings of experience are phenomenological themes. The “general” categories of lived meanings are incidental themes.

8.5.1 Incidental themes

My incidental themes indicate aspects of meanings that have incidentally arisen from participants’ encounters of signs or public art. They are the results of the phenomenological data reduction technique of ‘horizontalization.’ (See 7.6.2.1.) Each identified incidental theme is actually a horizon, which adds meaning to and provides an increasingly clear portrayal of the overall experience. There can be an unlimited number of horizons. Its purpose is “to point at, to allude to, to hint at” (Van Manen, 92) an aspect of meaning associated with the visual phenomenon. Findings show that, my participants’ incidental experience ranged from visual, conceptual, to social, to psychological, and to physical; they arose at private moments or in public situations. Below are the themes extracted from the interview transcripts.

Sculptures act as landmarks.
Sculptural objects as adventure playground.
I see prospect and progress in our life.
A meeting point, a sociable place with my friends.
Take pleasure from the visual dynamics.
My estate is a recreation park.
Intimate recollection of things in the past.
Satisfy my curiosity of the new.
A wonder about taste.
Prosperity well on the way.
Refreshing sight, memorable figures.
Build a new image.
Energetic and powerful.
A variety of pleasing sight I never will forget.
Ritual and spiritual in normal housing life.
Overwhelmed with historical associations.
A hi-tech estate in a rocket age.
My mind connecting with my home town.
I can see a better tomorrow.
Urban-rural dialog.
Modern-ancient dialog.
Greater attachment to public housing.
Feel affection for an extended living room.
Feel fortunate about living in a garden home.
Feel cultural about living in a museum.
Variety makes my place not boring.
Variety of design is freedom of speech.

So much to learn from the artwork.
Great opportunity to tell kids old story.
Create rhythm of life.
Bring in fortune instead of out.
I am making better memory.
A waste of money.
Blessing from ancestors.
An ideal prop for taking a photograph.
Visual confusion sometimes.
Future looks good.
Both legible and theatrical.
Rural history in urban life.
A sense of fun and relaxation.
My environment is like a carnival.
My estate animated by the objects.
History comes alive.
I'm proud of my estate.
Not just a sign but a colorful picture.
Dramatic view of the sculptures from my window.
No longer a cultural dessert.

The themes take the form of an insight, statement, or comment describing different images that participants conjured up in their minds while engulfed in their visual environment. Incidental themes vividly portray meanings of a different nature but they may not directly evoke culturally sustainable concepts. So, through “definition” (see 7.6.2.2), the second technique of phenomenological reduction, I reduced similar statements into core

themes that reflected experiences succinct to cultural sustainability. I also checked back with participants' original descriptions from time to time while developing the experiential themes.

8.5.2 Seven phenomenological themes: the essences

My phenomenological themes refer to meanings of experiences derived from participants' first-person accounts as being evocative of a sense of cultural sustainability – the “total experience.” It is for this essential quality that they are the essences of experience. They revealed what residents' visual experiences mean to the self versus cultural codes which revealed what visual designs mean to a culture or community. Since meanings of a phenomenon are never simple or one-dimensional I came up with seven categories by aggregating different individuals' experiences into a shared experience of the total phenomenon. Together they provide a “structure of experience” (Van Manen 1997, 79); the pattern of the seven themes structurally interrelates with each contributing to the central experience of cultural sustainability.

The themes are thus, universal although every experience is unique to each individual given his or her unique personal context. Themes are inter-subjective in nature, since they capture experiences of people living in an inter-subjective world, the lifeworld of housing. While emerging themes were derived from responses to questions surrounding the eight existing attributes of cultural sustainability, they included some empirically grounded experience which could not be assigned to any of the existing attributes but which appeared to indicate aspects of cultural sustainability, such as are “playfulness,” “prospect and prosperity.”

Below I describe them individually. For each theme, I begin with a definition based on participants' meanings, while drawing references from literature. I describe and analyze how common is this particular perception among residents and why this aspect of

experience is important to them. The historical background for the interpretation to interpretation is emphasized. At times I provide excerpts from the interviews to illustrate people's feelings and thoughts. Social factors or types of designs contributing to such interpretation are acknowledged too, for an important part of my research is to understand what external forces influenced participants' internal perceptions. For this, I put together the codes of visuals with themes of experience in a visual model to show how various design styles evoke the various experiences (see table 8.2).

Theme 1: Articulating image and aspiration.

The theme represents participants' perception that a positive community image is articulated through the installation of signs and sculptures in their estates. It reflects their belief that social image of PRH residents is upgraded as the characters of prestige, modernity, and a respect for traditions are attached to the community by the visual design. Hope and ambition of achieving such characters, being aspirations of residents, are visually articulated too. Articulating image and aspiration is probably the most salient theme capturing my participants' typical experience the visual phenomenon has for them.

The use of objects in communicating status, usually through a signification process, has long been regarded as a universal phenomenon. Visual forms in the built environment are used widely to indicate and reinforce status and class. Not only is this true in upper-class society, but it is also common in low income housing (Sanchez-Robles 1980). Francescato (in Lay & Reis 1994) states that residential signs can act as stimuli both for outsiders' impression of the people living in public housing and for residents' own evaluation of self. Marcus (1995) expresses similar view, "the exterior impression of housing significantly affects how residents feel about their homes, sometimes even how they feel about their own worthiness as human beings" (45).

Whether the worth of being a human depends on the evaluation of the appearance of one's dwelling, may be open to doubt. But revealed in data, symbolic meanings of signs and public art are significant in terms of expressing residents' life aspiration. As Ah Man commented on a name sign that is made out of sandstone and huge in its physical size (NS6), "I don't know why they made the sign so big, and in English . . . I mean . . . why not Chinese . . . so that even 'ah poh' [referring to some illiterate old women] can understand it." Still, Ah Man likes the name sign, "the estate looks 'forward' . . . public housing should not look shabby . . . I saw signs like this in expensive housing complex." [10-TKO]

Residents usually perceived their own immediate environment in relation to their wider, external, urban experience. Ah Man thought of the estate as "full of hope" upon his activation of the codes found in the name sign – prestige and innovation. He also developed private associations based on an image of ideal residence to which he has always aspired to.

Not only was Ah Man overwhelmed by the sign's shape, materials and color, but Mary, a bank teller, was impressed by its associated ideological values, "For public housing, it (NS6) seems too showy, too loud . . . but who cares, having an estate name that looks super, grand, modern . . . you feel the pride . . . living there. It makes you want to do better . . . to succeed." [18-TKO] Mary was not unaware that the sign seems to overstate the community's status which is made up of low-income people. Yet she looked determined; so I probed her deeper meaning, "what kind of success?" "Make more money, buy a bigger flat in new private housing . . . that has a good environment . . . that will be nice." A complex emotion was triggered in her experience of the environmental sign and stimulated the young woman's career aspirations.

One should not be surprised about such response; status, together with sociability and security are three basic needs in Chinese culture,⁷⁷ hence in public housing where the population is 95% ethnic Chinese. Consciousness of status constitutes encouraging moments.

⁷⁷ Martin, E. *Advertising in Hong Kong*. 1996.

Miss Ting, a 32-year-old primary school teacher, reflected on PA7 and PA8, two artworks that took the innovative approach, “. . . special, stylish . . . bring the whole estate much ‘high-class.’ Everyday I go around them, I feel I want to dress better . . . like a ‘neat’ person not shabby, a person with more ‘standing’ . . . more ‘culture’ [seems embarrassed].” [8-TC]

Miss Ting emphasized both the objects’ status-value and the influence they have on her. She re-invented herself as a result of how she perceived the visual code – a strong desire to live in public housing with a “better image,” if not “higher status.” The visual phenomenon was where she attached such sentiment, a physical/cultural means of articulating her aspirations.

My data in general captured residents’ aspirations for an improved and modernized social image, for which they were willing to modify their own manners, attitudes, even appearances in order to live up to the new identity signified by the “classy” design. Their attention to the visual objects evoked an urge for self improvement, a positive impact on them is a somewhat ethical function of the visual environment.

The visual phenomenon was also experienced as a means to show off some kind of achievement or taste. After all, public art is conventionally considered as high art, thus associated with taste. More importantly, these objects of taste are visible. Helen, a young working mother confided that she became keen on organizing social gatherings at her Yat Tung new home since she moved in. She recalled, “my friends seem to admire my living environment . . . we had good time here . . . a long way from the city but they came here a lot. . . we took photos with these sculptures . . .” [6-TC]

Findings like these captured the roles of residential signs and public art play in human society – signs are good at image building, both collective and public; public art offers a site for reflection, to heighten the spirit of a community, facilitating the self-realization of individuals. Indeed, not only do the environmental objects in the study estates add character to the visual appearance of estates, but they permit residents to reflect

and to alter their self-perception – they exhibit instrumental, persuasive functions.

Meanings presented here are responses to the interview topic of “articulating community identity” and “maintaining human dignity;” collectively they constitute a theme which I named “articulating image and aspiration.” By image, I mean the impression that a particular estate presents to the outsider. Image can tie to social status, taste, style. I distinguish it from identity because the latter generally refers to individuality and uniqueness, which according to my participants, are not their priority. In fact, they do not often speak of a cultural identity; rather they are keen on their community image. They distinguish between the former as representing overall Hong Kong, whereas the latter is tied to their neighborhood, which concerns them more.

Based on this differentiation, I determined that residents desire a better collective image rather than a different self identity or a new cultural identity. After all, for decades, this segment of the Hong Kong population has become accustomed to being “public housing residents.” They have no problem with the distinctiveness of such status because of the low rent privilege in a city much known for its high property values. But being a public housing resident does not prevent them from aspiring to look and live like the middle class. I concluded that what they aspire to is an upgraded social image, while maintaining the identity of PRH residents.

Residents’ feelings about an improved image owed much to their actualization of codes, such as innovative imagination, prestigious appeal, and auspicious celebration embodied in the designs. This aspect of experience is all-encompassing. It is a most significant theme of their experiences and constitutes to a culturally sustainable community.

Theme 2: Embracing diversity and creativity.

The theme captures residents’ eager acceptance of the visual diversity of

environmental objects and their excitement about a touch of inventiveness and novelty to their ordinary lives given by the visual dynamism. Two inter-related concepts comprise the theme – diversity and creativity. On diversity, two levels of experience were recognized by my participants – visual diversity and value diversity. Visual diversity refers to the stylistic variations of design while value diversity involves the tolerance for differences in worth signified by design. Creativity is not restricted to the visual, but has to do with the imaginative, constructive attempt to create form.

Visual diversity in estates is generated in various ways. For example, in Kin Ming Est., free-standing directional signs are located liberally in the public space. Large visual identities are installed on the roof of 40-story blocks, making them visible from a distance. Individual name plaques are fixed on the sides of individual blocks. They adopt imagery of different kinds – some from local history, like the fishing junk, others imaginative, like stars, planets or constellations. Still others are ideograms of the estate name – for example, a Chinese character is broken down to mean the sun and the moon. I asked Mrs. Wong how she felt about the variety of sign designs in her estate. She embraced diversity, saying, “I used to like things simple but here, the signs are different but meaningful . . . some are familiar to me . . . make our environment interesting and lively.” [4-TKO]

A pastiche of visual elements – a junk image, a fish pictogram, the galaxy, a palette of vibrant colors – might seem overdone, or redundant in the eyes of an outsider or a designer who opts for simplicity. The cluster may seem busy, or visually noisy, but for the inhabitants, the variety of visuals symbolize their origins and history and their lives, which can be just as varied as are the designs. An outcome of visual diversity is pleasure (Stamps 2004), as participants reported.

What I further found was that for some people, diversity of design implies diversity of opinions. Cheung Ba the elderly man, in an authoritative tone, compared the many designs to the many “voices” in society, and to the “freedom of speech” he and his

friends much enjoyed, “The more voices the better, right? You know what . . . they [sculptures] are trying to tell us different ideas . . . just like us [the group of men gathering around a stone chess table along the pathway in Yat Tung Estate] . . . we can speak our opinions . . . about our government . . . anything we like.” [1-TC]

Not only the men, but also teacher Miss Ting, embraced and were inspired by a strong sense of diversity and creativity in their surroundings, “They [the sculptures] represent Tung Chung in many ways, different, new ways. I feel a spirit of new Tung Chung in these creative works.” Miss Ting was convinced that the revitalization of old Tung Chung was partly achieved by the display of sculptures in her neighborhood, because “they bring life to our estate.” [8-TC]

In fact, diversity and creativity are notions crucial both to design and to the conceptualization of cultural sustainability. In graphic design, diversity is imperative. Visual identity design, for example, relies on the creation of difference, which ensures recognition and the building of unique character (Floch 2000). In environmental design, visual diversity is a common criterion for regulating architectural aesthetics, to avoid monotony or the lack of variety (Lozano 1988). For these fields, diversity is closely associated with creating the experience of surprise.

In sustainability research, diversity and creativity are already established as attributes of cultural sustainability (e.g. Spaling 1996; Chiu 2001; Hawkes 2001). Emphasis is placed on cultural diversity and energetic creativity manifested in cultural activities and visual forms. Theorization of sustainability is by far based largely in the West. So, loaded in their criterion of energetic creativity is the Western ideology of creativity – creating novel ideas that dramatically depart from existing ones (Lau, Hui & Ng 2004). This radical departure from the past contrasts with the Eastern view which emphasizes integration and harmony, and a respect for traditions. In the Eastern mind, a beautiful reinterpretation of the past is a creativity enterprise. There are empirical data that illustrate such differentiations.

Different age groups define and experience creativity quite differently.

Conversation with two participants under the interview topic of “maintaining energetic creativity” exposed diverse views on the same subject. High school student John described his favorite sculpture PA14, “For me, this huge green leaf thing is really a big impact to me . . . never seen such a thing before . . . no, I don’t care what it means . . . to be unusual is being creative.” [19-TKO]

Bookstore keeper Mr. Chan described a different experience of embracing creativity. He pointed to PA10, which depicts a traditional fishing method. What makes it special is the modern material used to produce the artwork – cut-out of fish punched from a metal plate and soldered back onto the metal net to illustrate “a rich harvest.” Mr. Chan applauded, “So creative . . . you never thought the fishing net could be made of steel plate. Look, our old tradition is represented in such a new way . . .” [12-TC] Tradition-minded Mr. Chan was attracted to the new design form. It is the old way of life being reinterpreted in new way – what he regarded as true creativity – that really caught his attention.

Visuals that take on the codes of harmonious integration, innovative imagination or auspicious celebration, were influential in shaping the experience of embracing diversity and creativity.

Theme 3: Evoking pleasure and playfulness.

The theme of pleasure refers to the feelings of happy satisfaction and enjoyment generated through the residents’ visual experience. Playfulness concerns the amusement-related pleasure evoked while dealing with the objects, physically or mentally. These positive feelings – happiness, fun, wonder, and liveliness – arise from seeing, thinking about, associating, or touching the name signs or public art. The experience of pleasure is widespread among people but the sources of pleasure varied.

Mrs. Wong described her delightful visual moment, “Every morning I walk out of the lift lobby [of her block] while going to the market, I see my signs . . . up there . . . so colorful, beautiful, like flags flying in the air . . . as if over our boats.” [4-TKO] The “flags” (NS8) reminded her of those flags and banners she used to see at her village’s Tin Hau festival celebration.

Tin Hau Festival is a big event in the fishing village where Mrs. Wong grew up. As a custom, villagers worship the goddess of “Tin Hau” (meaning “Queen of heaven”). On the day of festival they decorate all fishing boats with colorful banners – meant to bring protection and wellbeing to the boat people. The scene of flag-like name sign conjured up an image of the past for Mrs. Wong, still vividly remembered – a home village sentiment. The incident demonstrates *enargeia* – the power of visuals that take the audience into the vivid presence of a mental object by attempting to place things before their eyes (Sharpling 2004).

Phenomenological interview questions also made use of the immediate surroundings to increase an understanding of human experience. So as I saw Mrs. Wong meeting her friends on the podium, I was compelled to probe her feelings about her overall visual environment. Indeed, not only did the name sign contribute to these women’s enjoyment, but so did some public furniture of a distinctive style. Mrs. Wong described, “This is our ‘same old place’ . . . we [she and other housewives] like to gather at this bench for a chat before we all get back home to cook lunch . . . it becomes a routine . . . you feel joyful around here, the environment is pleasing.”

The women were sitting at leisure on what I call the “Gaudi bench.” Did they have any idea; did they care at all about the background of the environmental design? Probably not, but the playfulness, the diversity of forms, the vibrant colors work together ‘to please the imagination, to move the passion, to elevate the emotion’ of the women, again exemplifying the rhetorical power of *enargeia*.

Pleasure. What is the nature of pleasure felt by inhabitants in this particular

viewing situation? I discuss a few types of pleasure associated with human visual activity that have been theorized in literature: aesthetic pleasure, arising from seeing something beautiful; the pleasure of knowledge, humor, or fantasy, experienced for example in television viewing (see Corner 1999). Cultural pleasure, emphasized by Barthes (1977), is an everyday sort of pleasure originated in culture, heightened when one's sense of identity or status is confirmed.

Attention is drawn to "visual pleasure," which has been theorized as hedonic, individualistic, somewhat momentary, "controlling even sadistic" (Mulvey 1989). It concerns ways of looking through which to derive pleasure, usually referring to male gaze of female subject. Thus Mulvey's theory of visual pleasure has limitations, for example, to address the kind of visual pleasure sought in the housing visual environment. It is limited in terms of its ability to illuminate other circumstances in which looking could be a source of pleasure; that of a healthy, well balanced type.

In response, Gallagher & Ma (2005) develop a theory of visual wellbeing, proposing the notion of eudaimonic pleasure. Eudaimonia is a rhetorical concept that considers happiness as the fulfillment of a deep nature, the expression of virtue and deeply held values, the experience of vitality, its goal human wellbeing and flourishing. Vivacity and vitality of visual phenomenon and their associations help to evoke eudaimonic pleasure in human visual activity.

Mrs. Wong's love for her estate sign generated some sort of eudaimonia pleasure. A sense of wellbeing was enhanced by the vividness of the visual objects and of her memory. She may have experienced some cultural pleasure as she recognized her elevated identity through decoding the meaning of name sign, but it is eudaimonic pleasure that she and her friends have taken. These are people living in group. As they immersed themselves in the visual environment that has a high degree of liveliness and vividness, they shared the feelings of being happy, fulfilled, devoid of self-interest but enriching in their social life.

Similar sentiment is illustrated in the account of Ah May, another housewife in Mrs. Wong's chatting group. The older woman enjoyed moments in going about her neighborhood, viewing interestingly designed residential signs in her "extended living room." What's more, she felt the happiness with her visual environment at a higher level. Ah May told of an experience of a typical relocated population, "Seeing them [the signs] I smile from my heart. Why? It has my name on it . . . I mean . . . our estate name . . . Kin Ming . . . "healthy" and "bright" [literal meaning of the estate name]. . . It represents us, right? For many years . . . we never have a decent place to live, our squatter hut in Ngau Tau Kok never have a proper "name" like this . . . and the pre-war old building in Tai Kok Tsui . . ."

[5-TKO]

Ah May and her family relocated from the old district of Tai Kok Tsui. It took a few years to process her application for a PRH unit because her family did not previously live in PRH estate. Like many families in Hong Kong, they had to pay unaffordable rent to live in a room in a sub-standard old building. The type of housing was privately owned, overcrowded with poor conditions, and inhabited by many in partitioned rooms in a single unit. Ah May recollected, "On the day I moved here, I thought to myself: you finally 'go upstairs!' you now have a place of your own, you have a private kitchen; you have beautiful environment too . . . what I've always wished for all these years . . . I feel I belong here."

[5-TKO]

For Ah May, it was a dream come true – the fulfillment of a long-held yearning to occupy space up on the modern public housing block. The beautiful and meaningful visual environment is a bonus – it helps her to rebuild her life, to recognize her dignity and identity that were lost during her life in the slum. The visual experience created for her a sense of connectedness, a state of feeling happy and content, a self-realization – a sort of eudaimonic pleasure.

Playfulness. Still there is a less serious kind of pleasure evoked in participants

engaging with the visual environment. It is the play-related dimension of the objects, which is discovered by thinking creatively about the meaning of the forms, or the creative use of the physical structure. Siu Keung [21-TC], a 14-year-old boy, felt that his estate signs were “surreal,” “amusing,” and “playful,” because they used constellations as visual elements. Another girl, Siu Fun, found amusement and playfulness from the “physical challenge” the objects presented to her.

I interviewed 13-year-old Siu Fun, daughter of Mr. Yau, at her father’s teashop. When it came to her turn to talk about the public art sculptures, she described her experience to me with her eyes shining, “You mean those playthings? Oh! They are cute . . . fun . . . like puzzles . . . robots . . . yes, and balloons . . . I can play with them.” The three-dimensional nature of environmental objects has invited (even not permitted) physical contact especially among kids. Flipping through the photos, Siu Fun displayed joyfulness as she counted the number of sculptures she had conquered, “One time I climbed on this . . . [PA4] . . . I almost fell from this . . . [PA11].” Less cheerful as her eyes fell on PA7, “Humm. . . why have they made this so tall?” She resented the fact that she had not defeated the 25-foot high structure.

The little girl interpreted the objects in the directedness of her own experience, naming them straight from a child’s perspective. After all, she did not have the cultural literacy and world knowledge required for making social and historical interpretations. What I found was that the significance of the objects for the 13-year-old were a means of recreation intertwined with some sort of affection and innocence, “I like the ducklings . . . lovely . . . seven of them . . . mom said they are like us [school children] queuing up, at morning assembly in the basketball pitch at school.” [3-TC]

Young residents underwent their lived experience of visual objects largely in the context of learning and recreation. Merry feelings came from imagination or performing physical activities that meant amusement and fun to them. Bodily experience of the objects in seeking playfulness took precedence over socially decoding the meanings. Thus playfulness

can be taken as a cultural value important to this age group. Consider the role of play in human cognitive development, playfulness, together with pleasure, experienced by residents engaging were important attributes to the vitality of community in housing.

Theme 4: Envisioning progress and prosperity.

This theme points to an optimistic vision of a future that involves progress and prosperity in both human and economic terms. There was a tendency of my participants to regard the name signs and public art as symbolizing innovation and prestige. It follows that they reported envisioning human development such as raising and cultivating the next generation in a better environment or upgrading their social image. And they anticipated affluence to come with progress. The theme describes such perception – a positive outlook for life, developed as residents visually encountered the sophisticatedly designed, lavishly fabricated visual objects, then created in their minds the socially-embraced images of an advanced, affluent and prosperous community.

With respect to progress in life, it is a sense of future fulfillment, or human flourishing, which residents assumed while situated in pleasant, meaningful environment. Peter, a young man, told me that his feeling “has never been better” since he moved to the neighborhood. The computer technician has not made any progress in his job. Rather, a long day of tiring work plus an hour long bus ride to his workplace in Tsuen Wan on the other side of the peninsula simply exhausts him. But coming home in the evening, he found himself in a congenial residential surrounding – that made the day’s labor all worthwhile.

Immersed in a visually vibrant environment furnished with art and design objects, Peter sensed that this is where his family, especially his son, can grow and develop in a healthy and vigorous way. He shared his experience: “It’s been a bit far from Tsuen Wan . . . bus fare is huge . . . but my family is doing fine getting around the estate . . . My wife has

many friends here . . . My kid has plenty of things to play with now – before we didn’t have a playground . . . glad he is to grow up here.” [15-TC]

The outdoor environment encourages sociability and optimism by providing spaces embellished with meaningful visuals. The experience of envisioning progress and prosperity comes about in retrospect and by comparison – people contrast their current dwelling with their previous homes in which boredom arose from a monotonous and uncreative visual environment.

With respect to prosperity, a visual environment that signifies progress and opportunities for human growth has led to residents’ belief in promising economic development. Satisfied residents mentioned their confidence about making better money soon, now they are well settled; that their economic wellness would improve and prosperity was on its way. It is necessary to note that this is a culture-based perception prevalent in residents’ phenomenological experience, rather than a statically proven fact.

Pursuit of wealth and prosperity is such a popular concern in the Hong Kong mentality, an ideology especially embraced in housing. Despite the poverty status or socio-economic status that characterizes residents, a vision for future prosperity is held by a number of participants. I found Master Lam, a middle-age construction worker, grumbling about losing his job, ‘they don’t employ me any more . . . it’s my age [56 yrs old] . . .’ [17-TC]

I was sympathetic toward his unemployment, but was glad to see the bright side of his mind. In response to PA1, he figured out the spheres, components of the sculpture, as symbolizing the sun and the moon releasing light. For him, light was a metaphor for a bright future, which he applied to his personal situation, “If only my life can see more light, like this . . . that’ll be good. I feel full of hope . . . there must be something I can do . . . out there, there must be people to hire me . . . our economy is not so bad . . .,” he muttered, as if reassuring himself that job opportunities were within his reach.

Still, other participants perceived prosperity in their unique and peculiar ways. Cheung Ba, the outspoken elderly man, provided an unusual metaphor: ‘The Authority has invested so much on us . . . I mean . . . on these artworks . . . that’s a lot of money spent, you know . . . Maybe ‘flooding’ in The Treasury . . .’ [1-TC]. The Authority’s cultural policy to install expensive name signs and public art in estates was seen as a sign of economic growth – the “flooding, overflow of money.” It was recognized also as a good intention of the Authority, “I think the government is nice to us . . . we have an ‘art museum’ here! What more can you ask for?” Government revenue spent on improving the physical environment and in meeting cultural needs was not taken for granted but viewed with appreciation.

It all began with what comes into sight and ideas developed in the mind – sometimes it can be idiosyncratic. Cheung Ba related his thought to a bronze statue featuring a cow heading in the opposite direction with four ducklings [PA3], “this is a ‘golden cow,’ you know . . . delivering money to our estate . . . in not out, OK? We are the ducklings . . . the citizens . . . we are to profit from this . . .” Cheung Ba’s interpretation was a bit imaginative, and materialistic. This is not surprising. As Buruma (1986) criticizes, “Hong Kong is the consummate capitalist city . . . the Hang Seng index⁷⁸ is its heart chart . . . the materialist ethos of Hong Kong is so overwhelming.” Still today, this aspect of the Hong Kong mentality is commonplace. Cheung Ba thought of the cow as the objectification of wealth – the locals refer to the HK\$1000 banknote as “the gold cow” due to the gold color of its graphics. But from this, he inferred a vision for stability and prosperity in the local community as well as the larger society.

Cheung Ba’s associations are simply “naïve descriptions” (Giorgi 1985 in Moustakas 1995), typical of phenomenological accounts. While it sounds superficial, it would be inappropriate to think of them as result of false consciousness – that these are things residents wish but will never attain. Rather, it would be useful to consider the

⁷⁸ Hang Seng Index is the stock market index in Hong Kong.

interpretation as the result of visual rhetoric – the heightening of community spirit by providing pathways and a stimulus for expressing the community’s aspirations, which are moving rapidly forward.

Theme 5: Encouraging cultural learning.

This theme reveals some participants’ will to pass on knowledge – cultural, historic, even legendary – to the younger generation through the visual media of name signs and public art. The teaching/learning incentive is encouraged by the vividness and stylishness of visual objects and public art sculptures in particular. Their embodied historic-cultural information is what many parents would like their children to know about. Visual availability of the objects around the physical environment of estates facilitates the “learning” activity.

Tiesdell (1996 in Chiu 2004) says that visible evidence of the past culture can contribute pedagogically and educationally to the cultural identity and to the collective memory of a people or a place, giving a sense of cultural continuity. In my study estates, the environmental objects have been encoded to signify things in the past, ideas for the future, realistically or imaginatively. In fact, the term “public art” signals an educational ambition – to the “public.” They make ideal visual aids for informal learning.

Under the topic of cultural heritage, I asked Mrs. Fong to talk about any Chinese traditions she found depicted in the visual environment. From a sculpture that denotes the livelihood of “our ancestors” in the typical rural, small-village Chinese communities, Mrs. Fong perceived some family values, yet vanishing, in her opinion. So she tried to pass on to her son what she thinks he needs to learn about – the importance of solidarity, diligence, obedience, respect, and so forth. She found the visual objects useful to her purpose. Mrs. Fong does her morning exercise everyday along the “sculpture walk” – she takes along Ming Tsai, her 7-year-old son. “Ming Tsai is curious about everything he sees. One time he saw

this thing (PA6), he asked why the kid is dancing with those people . . . who are they . . . why do they carry stuff he has never seen . . .” [7-TC] Mrs. Fong took the chance to “edify” Ming Tsai – on how life was like for his grandpa, great grandpa; on how to be “a real Chinese.”

Parents admitted that the visual objects appealed to their children mainly for the theatricality of realistic representations and the novelty of abstract designs. Shapes, materials, brilliant color applications all contributed to the attractiveness. Kids climbed on the sculptural structures, but their sense of curiosity was also stimulated by what they saw – they did not mind adults telling stories.

So Mr. Chan had his son guess the meanings of “fun objects” to impart to the boy some cultural knowledge. Mr. Chan told me that all his 10 years old could think of while seeing PA11 were play-related ideas – like the curvy steel structure which the boy took as a see-saw, a play facility that he could swing on. His father, who is familiar with the codes reside in the objects, told the son that those curvy lines were waves, representing the blue sea of Tung Chung, “This is where you were born . . . now your home.” [12-TC] Mr. Chan drew reference from personal experience as well as from cultural history; subtly helping the child to acquire his own culture – an enculturation process. Both father and son were gratified as the boy picked up the meanings of those fun objects which were once an enigma to him.

Aspects of culture are not passed on biologically but learned. Through experience or participation, the neighborhood kids were happy to learn about their historical lineage represented in the sculptural figures. The above findings present a portrait of parents who attached educational value to the environmental visual objects. It indicates parents’ preference for their children to have an idea of their origins and of the values they should hold as they grow up.

The theme encompasses yet another meaning of experience identified by a few young people – an impulse to pursue further what they initially learned from the objects. It is the urge to explore the unknown, to improve one’s understanding by clarifying what seems

unclear. Candy was told by a schoolmate that PA9, a sculpture entitled *The Wild Goose Flying Toward South-East* was inspired by folklore that was featured in a Chinese opera. The 17-year-old student doubted this but decided to verify the information with her grandma, “She is a Chinese opera fan . . . she can tell what these red birds mean – I thought it’s about environmental protection. . . .” [13-TC]

During another interview, Mr. Mak, an insurance salesman, showed interest in a sculpture that has an unusual look. The art piece PA17 claims to use granite, a local construction material, as the base, which is combined with a stainless steel structure that resembles a ceiling structure in classic Chinese architecture. I gave him this information but the “internet guy” responded with uncertainty, “Really? Interesting . . . but I’m not sure, let me search on the internet . . . see if I can find out more about it.” [25-TKO]

These young people’s experiences and desires to pursue knowledge provided good examples of informal learning in a physical environment that is saturated with visual manifestations of culture and history. One takes pleasure from the process of learning and teaching, and from the outcomes, especially so when dealing with abstract designs – those who grasp some understanding about something are pleased to pass it on to others.

Men and women, young and old, students or less-educated, all appeared to be inspired by the wealth of significant meanings encoded in their visual environment. As shown in the data, they wanted to become more “knowledgeable,” yet, not in terms of becoming intellectual, but simply to get to know more about their culture.

This theme has developed as a new category. It focuses on the teaching/learning dimensions of lived experience of visuals. This aspect of experience, the perception that cultural learning is encouraged while engaging with the visual objects, is relevant to ideas of cultural sustainability. In fact, the themes on cultural learning, memory, and on traditions and heritage are inextricable categories of residents’ phenomenological meanings. They intertwine with one another in terms of their shared cultural impact which is the continuity of culture.

Theme 6: Refreshing memory.

One of the preconditions for a culture to continue its development is the uninterruptedness in the creation of meaning and memory by its people. This theme reflects participants' interpretation of their own visual experiences as refreshing memories. It is in part evoked by new things and ideas surrounding them in a new community, in part generalized from old memories. This aspect of experience is significant to the continuity of culture.

Literature suggests that "sustaining collective memory" is an attribute of cultural sustainability (e.g. Hawkes 2001). In fact, whether it is a name sign featuring a Chinese artistic motif or a statue that depicts traditional livelihood, it seems to bring the past back to life. Thus collective memory is sustained. However, meanings that make up any memory are likely to evolve over time and space as their contexts for interpretation change.

For instance, the traditional value of plowing rice field manually, as depicted in PA2, was perceived differently by some residents. It appears that the favorable old memory needs restructuring to fit a new conception in new context. In this view, the literature-derived attribute that stresses retaining shared memory of the past may not adequately reflect the true nature of memory my participants were creating everyday. I suggest that old memory alone is not as vital as refreshed memory in terms of its role in sustaining a culture. Some empirical data support the argument.

For residents resettled into Yat Tung Estate, intense memories of the once-so-quiet fishing villages of Tung Chung came to mind as they saw the scenic view pictured in the murals. They also identified the familiar facets of country living as portrayed in some sculptures. After all, it was where they started a family, built a home; a place their livelihoods used to depend on. Ah Seung, a Lantau rural woman described her memory of village life, "I still remembered . . . at dawn, my mother carried dried salty fish and vegetables she grew to

sell at the pier. My elder brother and I helped out . . . tough . . . but fun. We sold them to tourists arriving in ferries from the city . . . we were “village people” and they . . . “city people.” [11-TC]

Ah Seung exhibited a sense of loss, yet she also displayed a sort of dislike for the then unfavorable living environment deeply etched in her memory, “Rarely did we go out to the city . . . maybe once a year . . . Our village stone house was just a shed, small, one-story, muddy outside, dark inside . . . but we kids enjoyed running around in the front yard . . . really, there’s nothing to play with, just a bumpy bare ground.” [11-TC]

Now that the family has moved to the high-rises, they have adapted to and actually enjoy their new place, which is so urbanized, including a landscaped visual environment with play facilities, modern signage and even artworks. The artistic representation was reminiscent of their life in old Tung Chung, yet perceived through a new setting. Refreshed memories engendered from old ones and to be remembered in the coming days. Ah Seung commented on their present-day life, “Now that we live in tall building . . . this place . . . it’s more like the city . . . am I city people? The feeling is new to me . . . I think my children would not think of themselves as village people any more . . . they are city people.”

Rhetorical theories have linked memory to both place and identity, suggesting that memory can be encoded into objects and places for rhetorical purpose. My inquiry assumes that the rhetorical purpose of the Authority is to help residents reconstruct their “lost” sense of community through the feelings and thoughts generated by the specially designed visual objects.

It worked for Ah Seung. The rhetorical objects of public art were her memory objects. But data shows that, old memories of a vanishing village though warmly remembered were largely integrated into her current situation. Ah Seung was pleased about becoming “city people,” though, without forgetting her “village people” identity, which, after

all, was part of her history. The combination of identities, of sense of place, generates fresh memory which she will hold on through the days to come.

Ah Seung's story was typical of a majority residents, hence their ambivalent sentiment regarding self identity in their memories. Refreshed memories were made by intermixing of past upset periods and current up-lifting moments. Such was a shared experience reported among most age groups except youngsters. In spite of this, individuals' earlier memories, especially of place and identity, remain unique and specific to the self.

Consider the case of Ah May, whose past experience of residential environment was distressing – squatter hut, pre-war old building, nothing satisfying. She wanted to build stronger ties to her current neighborhood, which is furnished with meaningful objects that helped with her self-realization, and evoked in her a sense of wellbeing or eudaimonic pleasure. On the topic of “sustaining collective memory,” Ah May reflected, “For me it's like writing a new page . . . here . . . a wonderful place to build a new life. I still remember the dark tiny room my whole family shared . . . but I'm glad those days are gone . . . living in this estate I am going to make better memory.” [5-TKO] The generation of new memories becomes a remedy for her previously displeasing environmental experience.

Ah May's experience of an improved visual environment was conducive to her positive outlook on life. Names signs and public art, visual objects that formed my participants' environment were rhetorical objects for the recall and formation of memories. Those take on codes such as poetic nostalgia, artistic heritage and auspicious celebration were found to best produce fresh memory in residents when older remembrance integrated with newer memory. It is a phenomenological theme, an aspect of experience that contributes to their perception of a culturally sustainability housing community.

Theme 7: Rethinking traditions and heritage.

This theme captures the evaluative dimensions of visual experience. It pertains to residents' reassessment of traditional ideas and the long-established values communicated to them through the visual environment. For some, it appears that the once adorable cultural practices, customs and traditions visually depicted seemed to lose strength when juxtaposed with their current cultural reality. This particular understanding of experience frequently occurred in response to designs that developed codes such as poetic nostalgia or artistic heritage, regardless of the analogical or abstract nature of the visual representation.

Often when traditional ideas are represented and circulated in a contemporary context through modern media, techniques and materials, their meanings undergo new interpretations and a scrutiny of values. A conversation with Master Lam illustrated this pattern. On the interview topic of "preserving cultural heritage" we referred to an artwork entitled *Working at Dawn* [PA2]. The three-dimensional art featured the silhouettes of a farmer, ox, and a house cut from a steel plate. The middle-age man related his thought about his hometown and family, "Working at the plow, growing crops . . . for me is like remembering my father and my village. Farming in the paddy field was what he relied on for our livelihood in Po On [a southern province in coastal China] for all his life. My feeling was complicated seeing this thing . . . not sure if I like it . . ." [17-TC] Master Lam's visual experience triggered an emotional moment.

In a while, he tried to connect his visual interpretation to the larger issue of the development of modern China. Pointing to the farmer at the plow, he said, "The method of working in rice field is outdated, the manual work a tough task . . . tiring . . . yes, it's a traditional practice, but we look underdeveloped . . . [sigh] in fact we are . . . they still do this way in many provinces . . . life is difficult . . . because we're not quite modernized . . . must improve." [17-TC] Master Lam queried the worth of exhibiting what he called

“backwardness” in today’s “rocket age” [the age of new technology].

An ambivalent attitude to heritage and traditions characterized many middle-age residents like Master Lam. People from this age group have a history, a civic story to tell from experience. But they also acquire new knowledge about advancement in other countries, usually from the press, as Master Lam told me. They are, therefore, more open-minded, especially when compared with a more conservative Chan Ba.

The 72-year-old retired man gave an alternative view on the same sculpture. Chan Ba felt that the portrayal of the diligent peasant was indeed spreading the spirit of ‘Chinese virtues.’ He connected the sculptures with rural life, “showing our historical track . . . a miniature of our culture.” He stressed that the practice of working at dawn should continue. “When I was young I worked morning shift in the factory . . . another job in the evening. I still remember those days . . . woke up at 5, on the bus to my factory at 6 . . . it needs to go about that way . . . hard-working is a tradition, only way to success.” [16-TC] Customs and traditions embodied in artistic expression were applied to his personal context.

Among young people, being raised in Chinese families with accessibility to new media, compare the past with the present, the old with the new, shaping their complementary, maybe conflicting perspectives. For example, I asked Mary if the visual objects reminded her being Chinese. The 26-year-old woman had a lot to say on this topic as she referred to NS7. The 15-foot-tall name sign made out of sheet metal features three Chinese characters “King Lam Chuen,” the estate name, positioned vertically in the middle of a flowerbed. Literally it says “an estate with scenery of trees.” However, it is not the literal meaning of the ideogram, but the character style – powerful Chinese calligraphy in running script – that caught Mary’s attention.

Mary had learned water and ink painting, a Chinese artistic heritage. Her “master” (art instructor) impressed upon her the need to preserve tradition. Mary recalled, “I also learned to write with a sable brush . . . you feel more Chinese when you do calligraphy . . .

this calligraphy-style sign reminds us that we are a Chinese society.” [18-TKO] As she spoke, she compared it with NS6, another huge name sign made of sandstone, composed of English block letters. Mary proposed that the Authority should incorporate more Western design elements into the local environment, “In my mind, keeping our tradition is necessary . . . but too many Chinese features is boring . . . Here in Hong Kong, East meets West . . . Look, this English letter sign looks so contemporary. . . we should go for more new styles.”

These participants examined and reassessed established practices and values. They challenged the conventional meanings of cultural practices and artistic expression and whether they can be sustained in current times. Mary paid respect to and embraced Chinese culture, yet she was willing to acculturate to foreign ones.

Hawkes (2000) speaks of the importance of history and heritage in realizing cultural sustainability: “Knowing where we have come from helps us to discover where we want to go” (30). The traditional meanings of visual objects inform residents of their cultural past – where they came from. But reflection on the past also indicates a new attitude. They appeared to uphold the idea that heritage has yet to be re-examined and restructured against the current cultural reality, thus to gain an idea of appropriate direction to move forward. Instead of unconditionally preserving cultural heritage, rethinking traditions and heritage represents a truly constructive way to maintain the continuity of a culture.

Table 8.2

A schematic of the codes of visuals with their implications for residents' lived experiences of their visual environment in housing.

<i>code of visuals (design theme)</i>						theme of experience	
<i>innovative hi-tech</i>	<i>poetic nostalgia</i>	<i>prestige/ dignity</i>	<i>naturalist delight</i>	<i>artistic heritage</i>	<i>auspicious celebration</i>	<i>harmonious integration</i>	
↘		↘		↘		↘	articulating image & aspirations
↘				↘	↘	↘	embracing diversity & creativity
↘		↘	↘		↘	↘	evoking pleasure & playfulness
↘		↘	↘			↘	envisioning progress & prosperity
↘	↘	-	-	↘	-	↘	encouraging cultural learning
	↘	↘	↘	↘	↘		refreshing memories
	↘			↘	↘		rethinking traditions & heritage

Table 8.2 correlates the cultural codes of visual objects, or residents' favored design themes, with the phenomenological themes of experience for an understanding of the kinds of visual design that are likely to induce the kinds of human experience relevant to residents' sense of cultural sustainability.

Phenomenological themes as “perceived attributes of cultural sustainability.”

The above themes have emerged from participants' responses to an interview guide which is designed around the existing attributes of cultural sustainability. The link of

phenomenological themes to the construct was well anticipated. These “meanings in life” consist of potential for perception of cultural sustainability. I argue that the phenomenological themes are perceptions necessary to achieve cultural sustainability, for they cover the “total experience” as lived through by the “perceiving subjects.” Discussion on the emergent attributes with regard to their significance for sustainability research is presented in 10.4.

What then are residents’ general mental predispositions that account for such total experience? This concerns the other type of essence; interpretive positions taken in order to perceive cultural sustainability. The five experiential conditions, as a result of phenomenological reflection and interpretation, are presented in the following section.

8.6 Five interpretive positions: the essences

That research is qualitative is not ensured by interviewing but by “the researcher interprets the beliefs and behaviors of participants,”⁷⁹ “Experiential condition” or “interpretive position” is what I call the mental disposition that grounds participants’ ability to recognize the quality of cultural sustainability in their community. A qualitative researcher needs to get at what lies behind people’s expressed meanings for a deeper understanding of their experience. This is important in a phenomenological study because there are assumptions of intentionality; the perception of something requires an orientation of the mind to that something. What are the orientations and beliefs of PRH residents who are relocated or resettled in the study estates? What are the essences, pre-conditions for the total experience to come by? Through the reflection and synthesis of all the findings derived so far, I uncovered the five positions: “preparation,” “aspiration,” “curiosity,” “respect,” and “appreciation.”

⁷⁹ Janesick 2000, 387 in Patton 2002, 477.

Preparation.

Moving to the estates in Tung Chung or Tseung Kwan O was a big event in the lives of my participants. Prior to “going up the stairs,”⁸⁰ they made themselves ready for change – apparently it was a physical adjustment to live in efficient domestic units, move around neighborhoods, and travel to study and work on different forms of transportation. Occupying a flat in the New Harmony Block, for instance, was much more satisfying than inhabiting stone house in village or in a gloomy room in a pre-war old building.

Culturally, they were prepared for a change of lifestyle, of social image, of feelings and meanings in a much better residence. A visual environment loaded with colorful signs and public art is not unexpected; rather, it is long anticipated. Meanings they attached to the visual environment connoted innovative imagination and were built on residents’ expectant minds and positive attitudes – the readiness for new things and ideas to come to their lives. Therefore, preparation for change and openness for new considerations are experiential conditions, or essences of experience.

Aspiration.

Clearly stated in the Authority’s publicity literature is the vision and mission of meeting the rising aspirations of residents by means of building and environmental design, as well as providing community services.⁸¹ Explicitly in many participants’ response is this community aspiration – a hope or ambition of achieving better standing or improved economic status as they begin their new lives. The external forces of a rapidly growing Hong

⁸⁰ A phrase locals use to describe the incident of one who used to live in low-rise squatter hut being allocated to a PRH estate flat which is usually up on the typical high-rise housing block.

⁸¹ *Housing Authority Annual report 2000/2001*, Hong Kong Housing Authority.

Kong economy in part stimulate such aspirations. In fact, economic optimism plays a role in whether people determine that name signs and public art stand progress and prosperity.

Moreover, a resident's own relocation marks an important milestone in his own life – he may take it as a make-over opportunity if he has aspirations for a better life. So, with a heightened ambitious mind, people identified in the visual design the ideological codes of prestige / dignity or innovative imagination. Connecting cultural meanings to personal contexts, they further understood their visual experience as envisioning prospect and prosperity. Without aspirations for better lives, without the belief that they can and want to do better, residents cannot decode the visual environment as having positive cultural meanings. Nor they can use such meanings to reinforce their perception of ownership in a culturally sustainable community.

Curiosity.

Open-minded curiosity is a quality of a healthy community in a society.⁸² In the housing communities where I conducted interviews, participants often referred favorably to the hi-tech visual designs, while novelty and uniqueness of design also stimulated their interest. It occurred to me that most of them held a strong desire to know and learn about unconventional things – they maintained an open-minded curiosity. Curiosity seems to be the state of mind governing their interpretation of visual phenomenon and of their own experiences. Their curiosity led to a range of feelings, such as embracing diversity and creativity.

With open-minded curiosity, they became receptive to the sight of an outdoor environment very different from those they saw in other estates. It was out of curiosity that kids wanted to explore the sculpture physically, and to study the stories told by the statues.

⁸² Hawkes, *The four pillars*, 2001, 23.

Only with a sense of curiosity were residents able to imagine the cultural advantage of such visual phenomena may have for their community development in the long run. Curiosity is an essence of the total experience. It must be noted that being curious of the new did not contradict their respect for traditions – both attitudes coexisted in their minds. On the occasion of elderly people facing innovative designs, the traditional mind was confronted. And yet they described their feelings as envisioning progress, refreshing memory – curiosity grounded their openness to see new things in positive ways.

Respect.

Most residents, as ethnic Hong Kong Chinese, maintained a regard for the customs and traditions of China, as well as for its history and heritage. PRH residents comprise a substantive population of middle-age and elderly, some of rural origin – respect for traditions held a high place in the community. A lot of participants retained this orientation of mind although admiration for Western ways and things was also evident, especially among young people. With a respectful mind, some made sense of the meanings of visual objects as manifesting a nostalgic yearning for what disappeared; hence codes of poetic nostalgia and artistic heritage were recognized.

It requires giving glory to ancestors for the cultural legacy to be imparted, in order to retain a sense of rootedness and sentimental attachment to some cultural practices. It was on the basis of a respect for tradition that cultural learning emerged. Still another dimension of respect is revealed in data: the respect for nature and for the gods who have a reputation of bringing safety, fortune or happiness to people. Out of this kind of respect, people added ritual and a spiritual dimension to normal life.

Moving into everyday reality some held respect for the Authority – what I saw as a common orientation in participants was an adherence to housing policies. Conformity,

manifested as embracing rather than rejecting the installation of public art in their estates, did not arise from coercion⁸³ but voluntarily grew out of respect for the policy makers.

Obviously, beliefs about humanity, nature and god entail people's meanings of visual objects such as naturalist delight and auspicious celebration. This interpretive position also induced the related experience of evoking pleasure and playfulness. In this sense, being respectful constituted another essence of experience.

Appreciation.

Closely related to respect is appreciation. Not all but many participants displayed an appreciation of the Authority's provision of signs and public art. Others simply respected the Authority's decision. In fact some younger participants indicated a preference for more recreational facilities and less public art on the site. Nevertheless, all participants were preoccupied with an appreciation for being PRH residents and usually held a positive attitude about their estates. Gratitude to the Authority was expressed by all with regard to their securing a nice, low-cost living place in a city known for its congested, expensive housing.

As the basic housing needs are largely met, residents focused their interest in lifestyle, image, values, and desires. Their interest was drawn to the outdoor environment where name signs and public art dominated the sight. With an appreciative attitude, they tended to read and assess the visual objects in positive ways. For example, they assigned meanings, such as harmonious integration and naturalist delight, to the otherwise commonplace designs and reported the experience of rethinking heritage and traditions, of refreshing memories.

Still participants mentioned other aspects of appreciation: of the new image and

⁸³ For the fact that it is a visual rhetoric that residents are responding to. It operates under a situation which residents demand it therefore willing to accept. There is coercion there is no rhetoric, as Bonsiepe says, 1999.

character of their residence, of the distinctiveness among neighboring developments. Some explicitly acknowledged the Authority's good intention in providing "can't-be-better" surroundings and atmosphere, a pleasing ambience created by the visual objects.

Appreciation, I argue, is an interpretive position underlying residents' perceptions.

Interpretive positions and phenomenological themes, together, constitute the essences of shared experience, the essential basis for perceiving attributes of cultural sustainability. Consider an example: a resident would not be able to perceive cultural sustainability without embracing diversity and creativity in the visual phenomenon he encounters. Underlying, it is the open-minded curiosity which has conditioned his experience. A synthesis and interpretation of all findings is presented in the following chapter as a conclusion about this research.

PART V
DISCUSSION

Interpreting findings within the RSP framework

My choice to undertake research on the role of visual communication in promoting cultural sustainability resulted from a lack of study on the topic, as well, a lack of theoretical bases for understanding the nature of the topic. I set off in search of theory and finally constructed an integrated RSP framework comprised of theories from rhetoric, semiotics, and phenomenology. Although I believe that sustainability communication can be studied in different ways, a framework that allows the interplay of concepts and assumptions from these disciplines makes possible pathway to addressing the problem. Theoretical exploration, therefore, has been my primary purpose – a task that takes precedence over empirical procedures. From the framework I further developed a mixed-method research strategy which helped to answer my subsidiary research questions.

With the questions now illuminated in chapter 8, I ask: How well have my theoretical purposes been fulfilled in light of the findings? Written in the form of “theoretical narrative,”⁸⁴ this chapter interprets the findings from the vantage points of rhetoric, semiotics, and phenomenology. In each of the following sections, theoretical assumptions and concepts are no longer applied to hypothetical situations but discussed in relation to the specific situations of my participants in the housing context. The theories provided lenses

⁸⁴ I have written my findings as “thematic narrative.” Here I organize the interpretation of findings as “theoretical narrative” (Auerbach & Silverstein 2003, 40) which summarizes what is learned from the field and links it to theory, it provides the bridge between empirical experience and abstract concepts.

through which to summarize the findings with the advantage of systematically revealing how each theory contributed to the overall understanding of sustainability communication in housing.

9.1 A rhetorical view

Sifting the findings through the lens of rhetoric, the persuasive nature of name signs and public art was substantiated. The assumption that the visual phenomenon under studied is rhetorical, that it seeks the promotion of values important to people through the use of symbolically expressive design, was confirmed in various respects. First, a contextual understanding of the research site unveiled the rhetorical situation, in which, name signs and public art as design/cultural phenomena represent visual rhetoric. The rhetoric came into existence as a fitting response to the particular housing population and the housing situation which needed it and invited it. Rhetorical theory, therefore, is useful in explaining why the visual objects, as rhetoric, existed in housing at all – in response to a probable “imperfect” situation.

Exigence. Revealed in the findings, the imperfectness of the situation in housing has to do with the cultural needs of certain residents who have been relocated or resettled into the current neighborhoods. The exigence was a sense of loss of a cultural milieu once familiar with, now absent; and a rising aspirations, yet to be fulfilled. It pointed to, as participants indicated, a sense of disorientation felt prior to, or at the early stage of, moving into a new, uncertain environment; as well, an urge to prosper as they gradually settled in. This cultural anxiety constituted a contextual requirement of the visual rhetoric.

The Authority was seen by many participants as articulating a concern for their anxiety. One way to show concern, among other social services, has been the provision of name signs and public art around the estates. Herrick (1997) states: rhetoric is a response and

invites a response. The rhetoric of visual objects appeared to be the Authority's response to the exigence, while residents' meanings and experiences of the objects a response invited.

Persuasion. Visual objects in the rhetorical mode remedied the imperfect situation, not by direct application of any improvement measures but by the creation of meanings which attempted to change the perception of reality. Visual design projected values that appeal to the eyes and minds of residents, and became mediators of cultural values. The designs were, therefore, persuasive. They were visual means for altering the possible sense of loss in residents through ideas and ideals communicated to the community. Usually they depicted past experiences or historical heritage with positive connotations, or inventively represented community development, forming the basis for residents to develop a sense of belonging to the new settings.

Enargeia. The visuals were persuasive of the Authority's intended meanings because of the many rhetorical tools employed, including enargeia. To introduce enargeia was to use the visual strategy of stylishness in symbolic, sometimes realistic, expression in such a way that vividness and energy were created in the visual quality as well as in residents' associations and emotions. Enargeia brought into presence that which was absent; it worked to convince residents of a better outlook of life.

Reportedly, the design of name signs and public art caused the residents, or the rhetorical audience, to reminisce about the past or visualize a promising future. As a result, they felt the old-time memories were refreshed and they envisioned prospect and prosperity. The power of visual objects seemed to place things before their eyes that which they yearned for and desired. Participants also mentioned feeling energized by encountering the visual environment, first for its appearance, then by its meanings. They felt content, secure, delighted and a sense of wonder. Not only was their tension or cultural anxiety relieved but positive experiences generated eudaimonic wellbeing.

Eudaimonia. By giving pleasure to the viewers (e.g., through the naturalist delight

code), and expressing deeply held virtues held by the culture (e.g., through the auspicious celebration code), the meanings of visual objects enriched thoughts and feelings of residents. The perceived meaning of experiences such as articulating image and aspiration, embracing diversity and creativity, and encouraging cultural learning indicated that the human spirit in housing was enhanced through the rhetorical mode of visual communication.

Together, the experiences evoked in residents a sense of wellbeing – not hedonic but eudaimonic. The experience of cultural learning, progress and creativity, evidently promoted human flourishing rather than self interest or bodily pleasure. It was concluded that ethical choices were made during the design process, and the Authority’s good intention manifested in visual rhetoric exemplifies what Eco calls “ethical persuasion” (cited in Kennedy 1999).

From encoding to decoding. In addition to the rhetoric of design, the signification of visuals also played a part in the ethical persuasion. Indicated by the findings, it was through an encoding-decoding process, which took place in a rhetorical situation in semiotic neighborhoods. Visual strategies employed, such as enargeia, represent the rhetorical act of encoding intended meanings in the designs. On the side of residents was an active semiotic process of decoding visual forms, resulting in the cultural meanings of design. But intended meanings and cultural meanings may not be the same. Encoding and decoding were not likely to be totally symmetrical,⁸⁵ despite the use of cultural references to the best of designers’ knowledge. Based on the findings, the relationship between a rhetorical act and a semiotic process is shown in the diagrammatic of the encoding-decoding model (figure 9.1).

⁸⁵ O’Donnell, *Handbook of visual communication*, 2004, 528.

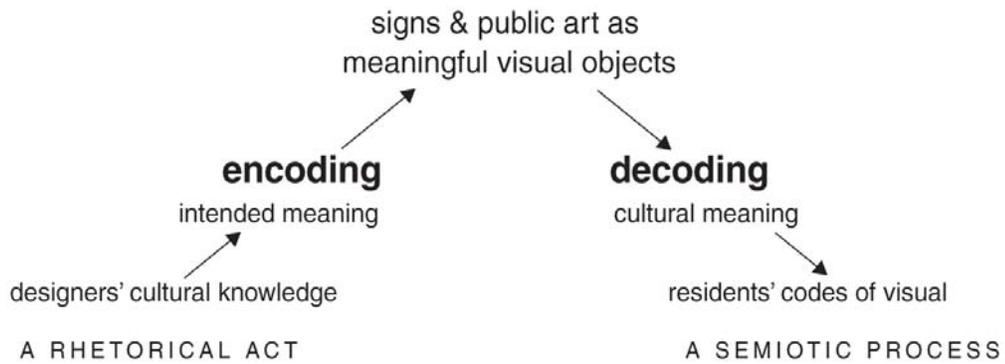


Figure 9.1

Communicating cultural sustainability: encoding-decoding model of environmental visual objects in housing. (Adapted from Hall in O'Donnell 2004)

9.2 A semiotic view

A semiotic view of the findings reveals that decoded meanings from the visual objects have helped residents to organize a set of cultural meaning that is consistent with cultural sustainability. The reason that the objects mean something and evoke feelings in residents was because the objects were embedded as the semiotic signs; the reason that these signs implied meanings that were consistent with cultural sustainability was because of their positive nature, as identified by residents, and the specific context of their interpretation which is a semiotic neighborhood.

In the housing neighborhoods of semiotic nature, name signs that have a utilitarian function were able to generate free meanings as well. Likewise, public art that embellished the physical setting were found to have cultural function – both types of objects have become signs. To communicate cultural sustainability, the visual objects have worked as a multitude of “rhetorical signs;” their concentration and density reinforced the meaning of each other, forming a text, establishing a signification system for the housing community. It

was because of the quantity and ubiquity of name signs and public art that their significations have been easily recognized.

Theoretically, semiotics has helped to position the objects as signs. Socio-semiotic assumptions about the external forces of politics and economy on meaning making have been essential too for it took into account the “exo-semiotic” processes of culture and society. Applying this assumption, for example, attention was drawn to Hong Kong’s phenomenal economic success in the past decade, which appeared to have underlined some participants’ interpretations of design. Based on the theories it has been possible to explain how participants’ ideas and ideals were developed.

Methodologically, semiotics assumes the identification of meanings through decoding the visuals. So, both my participants and I have been involved in the process – participants describing their associations of visuals within their social context; and I, combining their readings with mine based on my cultural competence and design expertise. We uncovered the signification of visuals, categorized as the seven cultural codes. Codes were found to have manifested themselves as styles, regulating, or controlling the cultural meaning of design. They represented culturally sustained values being encoded into the materiality of signs and public art, now visually portrayed. In sum, semiotics has facilitated my research to identify common values to the community that have led to their perception of the attributes of cultural sustainability.

9.3 A phenomenological view

Findings on the structure of residents’ experiences engaging with the visual environment that were pertinent to their perceptions of cultural sustainability demonstrated the usefulness of phenomenological approach to the research. As a result, it is learned that, for residents to perceive attributes of cultural sustainability was to become aware of some

vitality in housing community, and to have a sense of continuity about culture, which they derived in their own ways – psychologically, socially even physically. It began with residents’ activation of the codes embodied within their objective reality of name signs and public art. Cultural codes subsequently influenced their personal experiences, their subjective reality. It was identified that in the inter-subjective world of public housing there was little room for pure subjective experience.

A synthesis of multiple realities yielded the seven phenomenological themes of experience, the inter-subjective and collective experiences common to most residents. The themes form an essential structure highlighting aspects of meanings, feelings and thoughts. For example, feelings that the visual objects were articulating their community image and aspirations, that pleasure and playfulness were evoked, fresh memory were generated; as did the rethinking of traditions and heritage, and envisioning progress and prosperity.

Findings also provided insights into the interpretive positions that have grounded the inter-subjective experience. Based on the intentionality assumption of phenomenology, the perception would have required participants “to wish for something wishes” (Moustakas, 94), for the expectation of it makes the perception more likely. Certainly, residents did not knowingly wish for the presence of something called “cultural sustainability,” and I have deliberately avoided using the term during interviews, but participants’ mentioning of feelings showed that there have been some sorts of wishes, beliefs or interpretive positions underlying their experience.

The five essences or positions were preparation, aspiration, curiosity, respect, and appreciation. Taking on these positions, participants have interpreted their experience in ways more complex, and different than those of an outsider. As a result, those possessed a well prepared mind for change, aspirations for future, open-minded curiosity, respect for traditions, or in appreciation of the Authority’s “thoughtfulness,” were found to be those strongly recognized qualities of cultural sustainability in their community.

A synthesis of findings reveals that while perception of the visuals initially came from sensation – seeing the real objects – residents have responded to the objects as signs, deriving from which cultural meanings. External perception coordinated with lived experience under the influence of interpretive positions, which were closely related to their intentions. In fact, there is an intention in every communication as assumed by rhetoric, semiotics and phenomenology. As revealed in earlier discussion, due to the rhetorical nature of name signs and public art, intentionality have been incorporated within, and affecting, the design. Consequently, it constituted meanings and brought forth audience experience.

Thus, even though visual experience seemed to begin in residents’ sensation, it was their intentions that have brought them into the sensation mode. But sensation alone was meaningless; only by attributing meanings to sensory data could they become meaningful experience and led to perception. The mental process involved in perceiving cultural sustainability is illustrated in figure 9.2. It indicates that intention united with sensation and meaning, create experience, which contributes to perception.

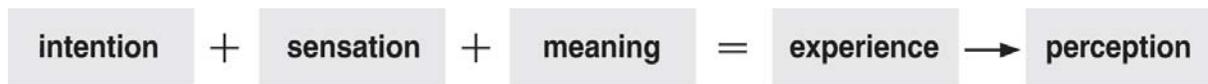


Figure 9.2
*Model showing the mental process involved in perceiving attributes of cultural sustainability:
a phenomenological perspective*

9.4 Conclusion? Integration?

As in poetry, it is inappropriate to ask for a conclusion or a summary of a phenomenological study. To summarize a poem in order to present the result would destroy the result because the poem itself is the result.

(Van Manen 1997)

Although this research is not a poem, it is predominantly phenomenological. The many descriptions of my participants' meanings and experience are poems of their lives. Preceding sections in this chapter has wrapped up findings from the empirical study through the lenses of rhetoric, semiotics, and phenomenology. However, I am hesitant to call it conclusion, however, because that would limit the potentiality of my participants' lived experiences to be further understood. I see my conclusion as a discussion of the results of integration – a term used in Hart's (1998) sense in academic writing. Hart states, "A key element that makes for good scholarship is integration. Integration is about making connections between ideas, theories and experiences" (8) – this is precisely what has been done throughout this dissertation in which I perform integration of ideas, theories and experiences for use in the conceptualization, investigation, and interpretation of my research.

At the close of this inquiry, I integrate, or weave together visual codes, themes of experience, and insights about constitutive situational and experiential conditions. This synthesis of findings provides empirical support for the proposition presented in 5.1, as a conceptual structure in figure 9.3. I did what Moustakas (1994) suggests about synthesizing findings of phenomenology, "bringing into life the universal character and dynamics of the experience" (143).

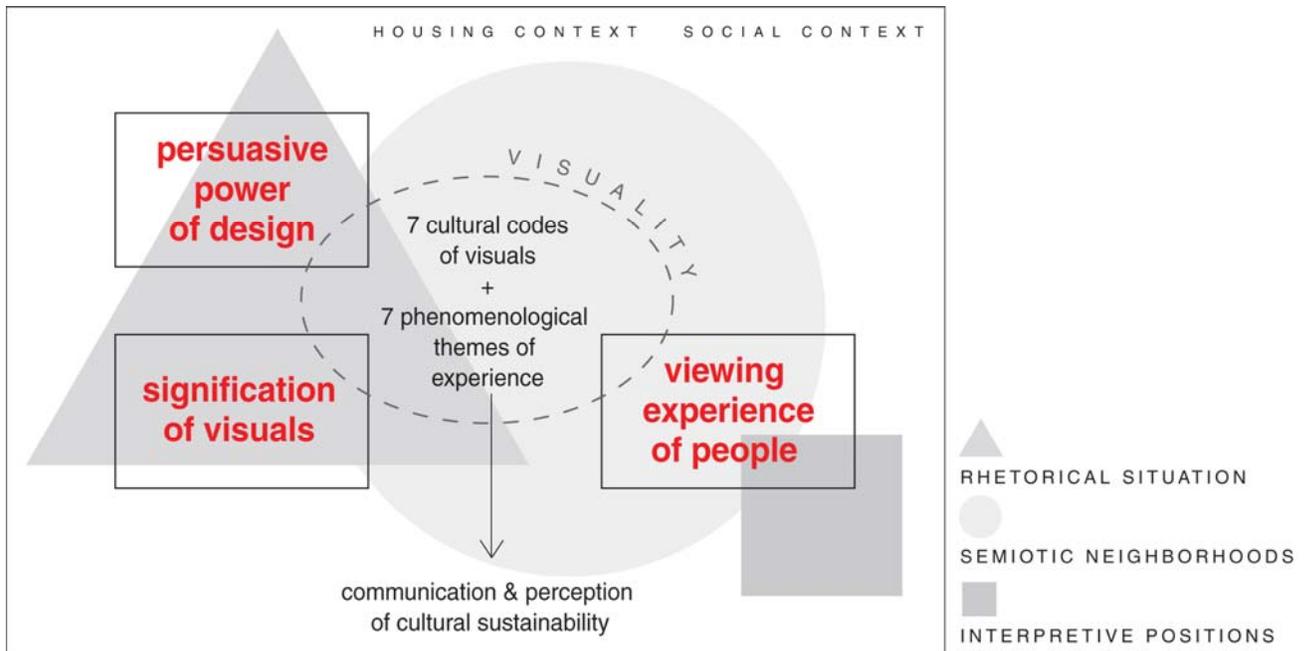


Figure 9.3
Conceptual model of the conclusion: communication and perception of attributes of cultural sustainability

To synthesize the findings presented in the preceding sections as “a gestalt of interconnected meanings” (ibid., 11) is to deal with design, meaning and experience in its entirety. Thus, it responds to my central research questions: How do the design, meanings, and experience of “new signage” and “estate art” phenomenon contribute to the communication and perception of the attributes of cultural sustainability for the residents of Hong Kong public housing? This understanding of my participants’ “total experience” is described as follows:

As residents went about their everyday lives in estates, they were actually embedded in their social context as they came into contact with the visual objects. So, on one

hand, they made cultural interpretations of the design features based largely on their socio-cultural knowledge; on the other hand within their personal context, they developed private associations of their own experience as triggered by what is depicted by the visual design.

They came up with two types of interrelated meanings: culture-based meanings derived from the specific ideology prevalent in and within the larger social context; and individual-based lived meanings of experience – meanings related to the self, drawing on judgment of the individuals. All meanings are results of the interaction among rhetorical power of design, signification of the visual objects and viewing experiences of people. I have called this mechanism “visuality” – the interaction, or interrelations, of the value-laden visible character of design objects and the related visual activity characterized by a socially constructed way of seeing.

The inquiry reveals that the design of name signs and public art contributed to promoting cultural sustainability through rhetorical encoding. Design, as visual rhetoric becomes persuasive in a rhetorical situation in semiotic neighborhoods, which characterized the nature of study estates. The meanings of design communicated sustainability ideas through the seven cultural codes (see 8.4.1) which were attached with values important to residents, thus responding to their cultural needs. Meanings of design incorporated in residents’ visual experiences made up their perceptions of cultural sustainability as residents’ were imbued with pleasant and satisfying sentiments, as described in the seven phenomenological themes (see 8.5.2). In addition, it required the existence of their interpretive positions such as preparation, aspiration, curiosity, respect, and appreciation (see 8.6), for the total experience to come by.

Implications for visual research and sustainability research

My dissertation process has evolved from the general to the specific; now with results derived from the field and concluded within the specific context, I go back to the general. I move from the housing setting to discuss the implications of the inquiry in a wider context. The research as it turns out, speaks to interests across disciplines – art and design, visual communication, environmental behavior studies, environmental aesthetics, housing studies, sustainability research, but I confine this discussion to my parent discipline of visual communication design, and to the new field of cultural sustainability.

I distinguish several research outcomes and implications, emphasizing their theoretical and methodological significance because they are the kinds of knowledge needed most in the two areas of study. In design, the need for reflection, theory and methodology in visual practice and research, and a philosophical understanding of design activity and human implications, is recognized (e.g. Wild 1982; Kinross 1986; Burdek 2005). Likewise, sustainability studies point out that the failure to theorize and study the cultural values underpinning human communities is what hinders advancement of the field, since the issues of sustainability is “ultimately a cultural issue” (e.g. Girardet 2001).

My findings offer a number of insights in this respect, making a contribution as they strengthen the knowledge base in visual communication design research and sustainability research. There being overlaps in the significance of certain outcomes for both

disciplines, I have not organized the discussion of implications by disciplines. Rather I discuss the particular theoretical or methodological insights by topic, from section 1 through section 4; I mention where they fit in and shed light on either or both disciplines.

My dissertation's main title as it stands is: "A semiotic phenomenology of visual rhetoric." Section 1 explains this characterization of the inquiry as based on the RSP model of visual communication. The model, having guided my study, is now defined again and evaluated for its significance to advance visual research. Section 2 discusses the visuality of cultural sustainability – how it links the visual with the sustainable. I also address its centrality in this dissertation as well as its implications for research. Section 3 points out the significance of categorizing meaning units as codes, themes, attributes. Section 4 discusses the perceived attributes of cultural sustainability, illustrating how the process and products of categorization have contributed to both visual communication and sustainability research. Section 5 discusses some limitations of the inquiry, followed by my recommendations for future design research in section 6.

10.1 What is a semiotic phenomenology of visual rhetoric?

The theories, methods, and even the conclusions of this inquiry have been organized within the RSP framework, demonstrating its importance in guiding the study. It critically integrates theories and methods of semiotics and phenomenology in the study of meanings and experiences of name signs and public art, examples of visual rhetoric.

A semiotic phenomenology of visual rhetoric argues that particular visual forms, with their design and meaning working as persuasive tools, are literally rhetoric that is endowed with corresponding significative and experiential qualities. Methodologically, their culturally-sustained and individually-centered meanings can be studied by having people verbally describe their experiences and perceptions, which the researcher then analyzes on the basis of semiotic and phenomenological strategies.

One of the characteristics of the framework is its status as a conceptual enterprise – thus it can be applied to different concrete situations in the real world. Another characteristic is the systematic three-part configuration of communication theories that can deal with the full range of visual communication elements. Love (2001) has argued that in many design research areas, researchers are required to address human subject considerations alongside the physical properties of objects, thus involving issues from interpersonal communication, individual cognition, socio-cultural forces, to economic issues.

The RSP framework offers a series of conceptual tools that design researchers can utilize. Theoretically, the availability of concepts within the structure allows them to attach new insights to issues of physical design and human experience in socio-cultural contexts. For example, when researchers conceptualize visual design as visual rhetoric, a variety of rhetorical assumptions can be put into use, helping to explain the nature of the particular design as it functions in culture and society. Without the framework there are no appropriate points of reference for a theoretical understanding of their nature and interrelated functioning.

Methodologically, the mixed-method concurrent nested qual+QUAL approach has shown itself to be a systematic and rigorous research strategy. Its application would be advantageous, not only to visual communication research, but also to the wide-ranging design research about human interaction with design objects and environments. The semiotic components of the approach offer a strategy for understanding the meaning of physical design, while the phenomenological components provide a strategy for interpreting the human experience of design. In fact, there have been attempts to use similar strategies in other visual research as Emmison & Smith (2000) report, but my clearly defined mixed-method, supported by empirical results, would assist future researchers in developing effective research designs and contribute to the small body of literature on methodology.

When a professional discipline gains a sufficient level of achievement and

maturity it moves from practice to considerations of theory and methodology, through which academic study is possible. This applies to the discipline of visual communication, for which professionals need theoretical models and philosophical understanding of the activity and its implications for people.

The RSP framework has both theoretical and methodological implications that can strengthen future research in this area. Since all visual communication potentially involves design, meaning, and experience, it can be understood through the RSP theoretical framework. I contend that all visual communication research is potentially a semiotic phenomenology of visual rhetoric.

10.2 Visuality of cultural sustainability: the essential link

Visual communication and cultural sustainability, what seem to be two totally disparate topics or areas of study, are linked and studied together in this inquiry. Their essential relationship is captured by the notion of “visuality of cultural sustainability,” proposed earlier in section 3.3, and supported by empirical findings.

The notion is, therefore, a theoretical outcome of the inquiry in response to the purpose of the study: to substantiate the amenability of cultural sustainability to visual manifestation. This idea began with my early supposition that ideas of sustainability can be communicated through the mechanism of visual signification and viewing experience (see 1.4). Through a critical analysis of relevant literature, the visual and social nature of the cultural component of sustainability was confirmed. Furthermore, a rhetorical understanding of visual communication design reveals that its persuasive power has a role to play in the mechanism.

The interaction among the persuasive power of design, the signification of visual objects and the viewing experiences of people constitutes what I call “visuality” – the

value-laden visible character of design object interacting with the related visual activity which is characterized by a socially constructed way of seeing. I argue that it is because of visuality that cultural sustainability occurs to the senses and to the minds of people.

This research has provided empirical evidence of visuality: it was found that cultural codes of visuals are meaning systems for maintaining and evolving culture as demonstrated by the value-laden design character of name signs and public art. As well, they are determined by residents' socially constructed, historically referenced way of seeing. Whereas phenomenological themes, representing experiences pertinent to a perception of cultural sustainability, arose in the inter-subjective world of public housing where a visual environment was shared among residents.

What stands out as implied by these findings is that both the visual object and the way the visual object was perceived were crucial to the communication and perception of cultural sustainability in housing – via the essential link of visuality. Hence the notion of “visuality of cultural sustainability” is substantiated; the capacity of the ideas about cultural sustainability that are embodied in design objects, to manifest themselves visually, and to be recognized by viewers. The discovery of such capacity is important because it informs future research by confirming that the visual channel can be used to evaluate cultural phenomenon for their qualities of maintaining cultural sustainability.

The finding has implications for both visual communication and sustainability research. For the former, it confirms Ball's (1998) assertion that the cultural worlds exhibit a visual availability. It also supports what visual culture literature, which argues, that “visuality” is a more appropriate term than vision to mean the sophisticated ways of seeing cultural phenomenon within social context (e.g. Foster 1988, Woodiwiss 2001). In fact, my participants' visual experience of signs and public art appear to be a socio-cultural process affected by their backgrounds, positions, and aspirations rather than simply a matter of naïve vision. For the latter research area, establishing the visuality of cultural sustainability

confirms Chiu's assumption about the manifestation of cultural sustainability through visual forms in residential environment – it extends the body of knowledge on sustainability and housing studies.

With the notion confirmed, we as visual designers become certain of our significant role in sustainability communication – the mainstream activity in the global effort of sustainable development. We now understand our work not only as a technical tool for transmitting information about environmental protection but also as a persuasive means of communication, signifying meanings, heritage, and aspiration of people. We realize that visual design can engage people in favorable thoughts and feelings thus to bring about human wellbeing. Finally, identifying the essential between the visual and the cultural component of sustainability is an important step in rethinking the power of visual communication in the worldwide sustainability endeavor, the mission of international design associations.

10.3 Meaning categorization as significant process and product

The goal of this inquiry has been to understand the design, meanings, and experiences of visual phenomenon in terms of their relevance to residents' perception of cultural sustainability. To that end, I conducted in-depth interviews, and upon analysis of data, I have organized the meanings of visuals and lived experience into sets of codes, themes, essences and attributes. Categories are my organizing devices. They help to create a well ordered, comprehensible system of arguments about my research concern based on research results.

Categorization is a characteristic of qualitative research. But I do not take it for granted. I constantly reflect on its appropriateness to the current inquiry and to research in general. Because my view has been that my participants' meanings, (for example, those focusing on design and those expressing personal feelings), are not something that can be

entirely separated from each other – they depend very much on each other; they are closely intertwined streams of thoughts within individuals’ cognition. The distinction I made among the units of meanings was mainly for analytic purposes.

Barnard (2001) says that meaning can be appropriately understood in terms of structure. So, the specific characteristics of objective designs as well as subjective experiences are classified and properly labeled using various coding and categorization techniques. The resultant categories differentiate one type of meaning from another; they also make easier the presentation of findings. Most importantly, I have not stopped at labeling but compiled categorical content into thematic narratives, describing meanings and experiences in full details, as presented in chapter 8.

I compare the action of defining something with my action of naming by which the complexity of data is abstracted in a few words. McNeill (2000) suggests ways to explain the concept of sustainable development: by definition and by description – a good definition is “rigorous, minimal, exclusive,” whereas a good description is “rich, informative, inclusive.”⁸⁶ I utilize both approaches. The names or definitions of my meaning categories facilitate quick, clear, theoretical understanding. For the deeper values of these named codes and themes, I provide in accompanying detailed description and discussion for each category.

Not only was the process, but also the product of categorization has significant implications for research and practice, even policy levels. Namely, cultural codes representing the most mentioned and best liked design themes could apply to research in similar settings. They could be used to determine if design possesses the ability to signify cultural sustainability. In practice, they could serve as guidelines for designers to determine which visual features are likely to induce pleasure and playfulness or to encourage cultural learning in viewers. At the cultural policy level, categories of the cultural meanings of name signs and public art can improve how government agencies formulate public graphics /

⁸⁶ *Global sustainable development in the 21st century*, 2000.

public art policies in residential settings.

For visual research in particular, the phenomenological themes provide an orientation for research on the human dimensions of visual experience, which makes up for what is neglected in most formal design research. The categorization of human positive meanings and experiences of visuals, when disseminated, offers an important incentive to the professional field of visual communication design – when the result is made accessible to practitioners it will help them appreciate the sustaining human value of their designs, and how work functions beyond utility and aesthetics.

Thus the set of human-oriented themes nicely illustrates the significance of meaning categorization. But its content is even more significant, for the themes correspond to the perceived attributes of cultural sustainability, representing the emergent views of my participants rather than existing views in literature. Their implications are worthy of further discussion.

10.4 Perceived attributes of cultural sustainability: the emergent views

An effort has been made in this research to substantiate the amenability of cultural sustainability to visual manifestation (Chiu 2001). Establishing the essential link, the visuality of cultural sustainability, is a first step taken to advance Chiu's idea. The next step is to understand the attributes and qualities of human experience associated with cultural sustainability. A set of human-oriented themes was developed based on responses to the existing attributes of signs and art. Since the themes represent the emergent views of my participants – the “perceiving subjects” (Moustakas) – they are the perceived attributes of culturally sustainable environments. This finding has significant implications for sustainability research because it reflects a community's shared ideals and values about life in the 21st century.

Culture is a dynamic process. It is constantly shifting (Hawkes 2001). So are the attributes of things that are culturally sustainable because they rely heavily on what is valued in culture. Existing knowledge about their constituent qualities are somewhat rudimentary and speculative. My research therefore confirms, modifies, and expands on existing interpretations based on empirical evidence. The emergent categories, grounded in a residential context, reflect only a slight difference from existing ones. But the result is significant for it reports faithfully what really are the ideas and ideals shared by ordinary people, rather than those hypothesized by scholars.

Literature has also shown that different disciplines maintain their own focus of interest in regard to cultural sustainability. So I bring together their major concerns – community vitality and cultural continuity⁸⁷ – as two broad categories. They subsume all the perceived attributes. However, I acknowledge the significant overlap and connection among attributes. Consider “evoking pleasure and playfulness,” a resident’s enjoyment that arises from the many ways he engages with visual objects and environment. This attribute may relate to “envisioning progress and prosperity,” which refers to another attribute of experience that also induces pleasure. While “generating fresh memory” refers to different lived experiences that could generate new memories in every resident. These parts of residents’ lived experiences interact; that is, when all attributes come together, the sense of community vitality and cultural continuity become more likely for residents.

Figure 10.2 presents a continuum – on one end it is the vitality of community, the other end the continuity of culture. The seven perceived attributes are located along the vitality-continuity continuum. This is meant to provide a comprehensive view of the attributes in a meaningful structure according to their relevance to each broad category.

⁸⁷ Based on findings, I define vitality of community as a quality of a neighborhood ambience that is full of life, dynamism and being healthy; a more locally-based kind of vitality, effect of the site-specific visual objects on the community. Continuity of culture has to do with maintaining important part of one’s old culture as well as integrating part of new ideas of contemporary time – I take Jandt’s (2001) view that integration ensures a continuity of culture.



Figure 10.1
The seven perceived attributes of cultural sustainability along the vitality-continuity continuum.

As mentioned in the preceding section, I have been skeptical about the categorization of meanings, for I hold that the true spirit of cultural sustainability cannot be separated, nor be captured into categories; because of their holistic nature and linkage to one another. But I also take it as a useful means to establish the global concept if we theorize and categorize, making them convenient for analytic purposes in future research. In support of this statement, it is useful to refer to some attempts at developing indicators, goals, themes, or principles of sustainability.

Mudacumura (2002) notes that definitions of sustainable development, as well as that of sustainability, have been ambiguous; thus, he devotes an entire doctoral dissertation to building a general theory of sustainability, introducing sets of theoretical constructs – those of the economic, political, social, ecological and cultural. Back in the last decade, *Agenda 21* presents themes such as “a prospering world,” “a just world,” “a habitable world” as an outline for strategies and goals.⁸⁸ Focusing on the cultural dimension, a publication entitled *Cultural Vitality in Communities: Interpretation and Indicators*, develops quantifiable

⁸⁸ *An introduction to sustainable development: CIWEM Booklet 7, 1997.*

measures of art and culture to provide sustainable indicators of cultural vitality.⁸⁹ It appears to be a consensus view that categorization as a human instinct, or cognitive tool, could contribute to the understanding of sustainability concepts.

Modifying existing attributes and creating new ones, as well as providing their content descriptions, make the qualities of cultural sustainability less ambiguous and researchable. One of the reasons why research into cultural sustainability or sustainability communication is still in its infancy has been the deficiency of knowledge about how it could be conceptualized and communicated. The perceived attributes provide an empirically-derived framework of analysis to further assess cultural sustainability in future research, thus stretching the body of knowledge in this area.

10.5 Limitations of study

There are several limitations to the inquiry, one of which concerns sampling: the selection of units of analysis, sample size, and the study setting, which is an Asian context. Another limitation relates to the nature of data I used to develop the codes and themes.

On sampling, my units of analysis are limited to four PRH estates, 31 research participants, 12 name signs and 17 public artworks. The sample size is small in relation to the total population of PRH estates in the larger housing context. While purposive sampling tends to decrease the generalizability of the findings, it is important to note that the four study estates were necessary chosen – being known for their particular visual phenomenon, which is the object of my study. My participants were then purposively selected from these estates. Their backgrounds and situation make them the best respondents to my interview questions. By no means are they representative of the larger housing population, yet their generalizability to the population of thousands in the study estates is strong.

⁸⁹ See Jackson & Herrarz 2006.

Phenomenological study uses a small sample size; some qualitative research may use a larger sample size – it depends on the purpose and context of the study. My “semiotic phenomenology” looks to derive in-depth descriptions of human lived experience of the phenomenon under investigation. All units of analysis, including the 31 interviewees have been carefully and purposively selected. The sample has vital strength to the research – the manageable number of participants ensures enough experiential accounts to be drawn from, and being unique to, individuals. But congregating individual accounts, the general dispositions of social groups are displayed. On the choice of name signs and public art, they do not constitute a limitation but rather display just the kind of visual character I deemed necessary to manifest cultural sustainability.

It may also be argued that the Asian context in which I conduct the inquiry is a limitation. Somehow it is the specificity of the context that has drawn me into doing this design research project. Design philosopher Fry (2003) speaks of “design’s other,” a concept in response to the current discourse of design which is almost totally Eurocentric, particularly its objects of engagement. Fry notices that when design research does move beyond familiar territory it imposes ideas of design as if they were universal. Yet there are understandings, histories and practices of design outside this universalist construct . . .⁹⁰ He suggests that “design’s other” – design from other cultures such as those from Africa, Asia and Middle East – be made visible and engaged without being measured against Eurocentric norms.

By conducting a research with ethnic Chinese in a physically tiny city in South East Asia, I explored their ideas of design in hope of generating a design discourse based on the experience of Asian people. It provided an opportunity to study whether ideas of design are perceived as universal or as local in an “oriental” territory. Research that takes place in an eastern context with data that represents only an Eastern perspective contributes to discourse about the “design’s other.”

⁹⁰ <http://www.designphilosophy.com>. Retrieved March 4, 2003.

As with the limitation of data, there are emotional connotations that arise from residents' encounters with their visual environment; there are practical concerns that are troubling residents in their everyday life. For example, a few housewives complained about the insufficient number of laundry drying racks. Some kids asked for more recreational facilities – adding a basketball pitch or a roller skating field would be great for them. Others craved more apartment living space as their families grew bigger. These are data related to the functional, rather than cultural/visual aspects of residential experience. But they do not constitute a limitation of the inquiry, even if they offer no direct insight into the research.

To be sure, spatial and utilitarian needs and the quality of housing interior and physical conditions are nevertheless main sources of satisfaction for people with low income. But public housing by nature, tends to be less than perfect in its construction, service features and amenities in comparison with the more expensive private housing. As a matter of fact, less ideal physical qualities are intrinsic to this particular housing type – that is what makes them affordable for a large low-income population. Consider Cruan's (1970, 1986) contention: when the more functional criteria of public housing have been satisfied, the appearance of the immediate physical environment does affect residents' satisfaction – a sign of evolving human needs.

In view of this, I argue that residents' increasing utilitarian needs do not conflict with their cultural needs, nor are they limiting as data. Rather they are revealing. They expose the evolution of human needs from the basic to the more sophisticated, from the material to the cultural, in the housing context. As shown in findings, vibrant signs and meaningful public art, by improving the physical appearance of estates, has fulfilled and engaged residents. Even more, cultural codes or the design of visuals are communicates the community's shared ideals and values about life, expresses identity and aspirations, thus satisfying their psychological-cultural needs. Utilitarian needs are not treatable by visual

design, yet cultural needs can be met when the meanings of design create favorable thoughts and feelings in residents.

10.6 Suggestions for future research

To build on what I have done in this dissertation, there are many things I could pursue in terms of research. Perhaps the next step would be to take the theoretical framework and the mixed-method strategy into studying other visual phenomenon, using different populations in other contexts. Greater clarification of the conceptual and methodological tools might occur; better understanding of meaning and experience of visuals might develop. In the following I formulate various recommendations for future research: to better conceptualize and articulate the nature of sustainability communication; to further establish the role of visual rhetoric in communicating sustainability, and to substantiate its positive human implications as ethical function.

First, sustainability communication, the conceptual background to this dissertation, needs to be better defined, because as a term it is undertheorized and as a design / communication activity it is understudied. This dissertation has questioned the role of visual objects as simply the medium for technically transmitting messages of green concern. (See the overview chapter) It arrives at the conclusion that the visual environment is also a cultural form, a rhetorical means to create, communicate, and organize a sense of cultural sustainability for people. My findings indicate that the communication of sustainable cultural values follows a “ritual model”⁹¹ rather than “transmission model.” By a “ritual model” it directs attention not toward the transportation or extension of information but toward the maintenance of society and the representation of shared beliefs. Such preliminary understanding is useful. Yet additional work is necessary to elucidate the nature and

⁹¹ James Carey, *A cultural approach to communication*, 1989.

importance of “sustainability communication” to push forward the area of study.

Second, on visual rhetoric, more effort is needed to study and appreciate its persuasive power, which, is frequently used to refer to propaganda or empty speech. What is being advocated here is that we should refrain from perceiving rhetoric, the communication tradition, in simplistic way. Visual rhetoric as used in the design of name signs and public art has shown to enhance the human spirit and promote human flourishing (eudaimonia). Perhaps we should recognize why Stafford (1996) sought to demonstrate the capacity of visuals for good intervention (see 1.7). According to my findings, name signs and public art evoke in residents positive meanings and good feelings. They accomplish some of the cultural goals of the Authority – goals directed at the residents’ quality of life. In rhetoric’s defense, persuasive messages embodied in visuals that encourage cultural learning, embrace diversity and creativity, are neither “empty” nor negative, but ethical and positive.

This leads to my third and strongest recommendation: to establish the idea that sustainability communication by visual means demonstrates a kind of visual ethics. Being ethical is contributing to the “human pursuit of beneficent life” (Newton 2005), a quality that seems evident in the cultural phenomenon of residents’ experiences of name signs and public art in housing. The significance of this line of visual research is briefly introduced in section 1.6, and verified in this inquiry.

Revealed in findings, the deliberate integration of words and image, color and volume, figures and space, and in the surface and structure of signs and public art, speak to and for the community. By helping people express human goals and aspirations, visual design carries out “principled rhetorical action” (Schriver 1998). Sometimes rhetoric continues to exert influence beyond its viewing context and across time (Hauser 1986). Just as visual rhetoric in housing induces the eudaimonic wellbeing of everyone, not for one entity. A rhetorical work, as such, is like a moral action because it aims, and somewhat manages to solve the problem, change the defective reality, or overcome obstacle (Bitzer

1968). I argue that my study phenomenon exemplifies the ethical function of visual rhetoric by evoking many pleasurable and life affirming thoughts and feelings in residents.

In fact, design discourse has suggested that visual communication design around the world has moved toward more rhetorical approaches (Schriver 1998; Buchanan 1985; Frascara 1995). However, its persuasive power is sometimes misunderstood as being negative. I must emphasize that, '[P]ersuasion was not necessarily an underhand device but rather a socially oriented form of reasoning . . .' (Eco 1976, 277). As in housing, the rhetorical power lies in design's ability to influence, direct, project residents' desires, dreams and aspirations. It demonstrates sustainability communication in response to cultural needs.

In sum, the inquiry shows that the communication process among the design, meanings, and experiences of the visual phenomenon is, to a great extent, an ethical function of visual design, the potential of which lies in the cultural significance of visuals that work to benefit residents' feelings and perceptions on a long-term basis. This discussion responds to the second part of my central research questions. Still sustainability as an ethical function of visual design is a topic wide open for future investigation. I consider an ethical mode of thinking as a foundation of the future of design practice – it has some degree of urgency. Since it is not something that can be further pursued here; I propose it as a direction for future design research.

Epilogue

Cultural sustainability is a theoretical construct; the perception of which exists only in the minds of residents; it is something that may be present or absent but something that are yearned for in human communities. Visual communication design has played a significant role, as demonstrated in the study, in the manifestation of ideas pertinent to the construct. From an instance of sustainability communication in the Hong Kong context for housing communities, this dissertation illuminates the potentials of visual communication to promote ideas of cultural sustainability in other contexts for other human communities. At a time when communication is still treated as “an addendum to the ‘real business’ of sustainable development” (Shea 2005), I would like to suggest, on the basis of my findings, that the role visual communication plays in the “business” is in fact a vital one – especially through the social production and signification of values it helps to make cultural sustainability an actuality. I hope that this dissertation makes a useful contribution to the discussion in design community on ways in which visual design can enhance the lives of people and benefit the society through its cultural function.

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Appendices

Appendix A Visual aids used at interview: public art (PA) and estate name sign (NS)



PA1



PA2



PA3



PA4



PA5



PA6



PA7



PA8



PA9



PA10



PA11



PA12



PA13



PA14



PA15



PA16



PA17



NS1



NS2



NS3



NS4



NS5



NS6



NS7



NS8



NS9



NS10



NS11



NS12

Appendix B Research participant record

identification ¹ name	interview ² no.	age/occupation, social group ³	sex	Interview date	interview location ²
Cheung Ba	1-TC	75/elderly	M	July 25	Yat Tung I
Mr Yau	2-TC	55/tea room owner	M	July 29	Yat Tung I
Siu Fun	3-TC	13/student	F	July 29	Yat Tung I
Mrs Wong	4-TKO	48/housewife	F	July 30	Kin Ming
Ah May	5-TKO	54/housewife	F	July 30	Kin Ming
Helen	6-TC	32/shop sales	F	July 31	Yat Tung I
Mrs Fong	7-TC	39/housewife	F	Aug 1	Yat Tung I
Miss Ting	8-TC	32/primary school teacher	F	Aug 3	Yat Tung I
Uncle Kuen	9-TKO	65/elderly	M	Aug 4	Kin Ming
Ah Man	10-TKO	42/resturant worker	M	Aug 4	Kin Ming
Ah Seung	11-TC	55/housewife	F	Aug 7	Yat Tung II
Mr Chan	12-TC	50/book store keeper	M	Aug 7	Yat Tung I
Candy	13-TC	17/student	F	Aug 8	Yat Tung I
Cheung Sum	14-TC	68/elderly	F	Aug 8	Yat Tung I
Peter	15-TC	28/computer technician	M	Aug 10	Yat Tung II
Chan Ba	16-TC	72/elderly	M	Aug 10	Yat Tung I
Master Lam	17-TC	56/construction worker	M	Aug 14	Yat Tung I
Mary	18-TKO	26/bank teller	F	Aug 17	Sheung Tak
John	19-TKO	16/student	M	Aug 18	Kin Ming
Jenny	20-TKO	16/student	F	Aug 18	Kin Ming
Siu Keung	21-TKO	14/student	M	Aug 20	Kin Ming
Luk Ba	22-TC	72/elderly	M	Aug 21	Yat Tung I
Mr Mak	23-TKO	25/insurance agent	M	Aug 25	Seung Tak
Peggy	24-TC	30/make up artist	F	Sept 3	Yat Tung I
Alan	25-TC	19/student	M	Sept 3	Yat Tung II
Ah Ba	26-TKO	75/elderly	M	Sept 4	Kin Ming

¹ Fictitious names are used in place of real names for identification purpose.

² Interview numbering system: participant number-site name, indicated as 1-TC (Tung Chung), 4-TKO (Tseung Kwan O).

³ Demographic emphasis placed on age, social group, occupational status. Four categories: elderly, housewife, student, and worker (of different occupations)

⁴ PRH estate where interview was conducted.

Appendix C Interview protocol

Interview #				Date		Time	
ID. name				Site		Estate	
Sex	M / F	Age		Location			

* “Object” refers to environmental visual objects, either estate name signs or public art sculptures. “Object” is substituted with “name sign” or “sculpture” during interview depending upon the particular visual form an interviewee is responding to. Real objects are visible on location while photographic objects are referred to when necessary.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS:

- What do you think of the (objects)* here in the estate?
- Name me 3 designs that you are in favor of.
- What comes to mind when you see them?
- Describe for me the one you like most. (how would you describe the objects you are in favor of?)
- Tell me about your meanings of the design.
- What do you think of the (objects) in other neighborhoods?
- What specifically about them appeal to you?
- What kind of design you want most to see in your own estate? Why?
- What kind of design you think can best represent your estate or yourself?

- Why do you think Housing has installed the (objects) here?
- Did you ever hear your neighbors talking about the (objects)?
(If yes) What did they say?

INTERVIEW GUIDE (conversation topics with suggested questions):

General experience

- Try to remember back when you first became aware of these (objects).
- Describe for me how you feel seeing them standing around your neighborhood.
- What does the (object) mean to you?
- What concerns you most about having them around?
- What do you like most about them?

Preserving cultural heritage

- Talk about any Chinese traditions you find depicted by these (objects).
- In what ways do the (objects) remind yourself as a Chinese?
- Tell me something they remind you of that are familiar to you as a Chinese.

Articulating community identity

- How does your visual experience of these (objects) change your sense of who you are?
- What social image you think the design and meanings of these (objects) are creating for you?
- Having the (objects) here, do you, as a resident, feel your status upgraded? Why?

Recognizing human dignity

- Do you feel respected by what the designs mean to you? Why do you feel that way?
- Do you feel attached to the (objects) by what the designs mean to you? Why?

Sustaining collective memory

- Does any (objects) take you back into any moment in your life?
- Describe the memories you recall while seeing them. Are they any good? Why?

Maintaining energetic creativity

- Would you say the designs are creative and artistic?
- (If yes) Would you say creative design bring dynamic and add life to your neighborhood? Why?
- How important to you is your neighborhood being energetic?

Expressing value diversity

- Describe your feelings surrounded by (objects) of different designs.
- What does a variety of design mean to you?

Evoking human enjoyment

- Describe your feelings seeing them everyday on your way to the (bus stop, school, market).
- Would you say you take pleasure in seeing them? Why?

Enhancing community wellbeing

- Would you say the experience of seeing them bring you a sense of belonging to the community?

- How has living in an estate with these (objects) affected your impression about being a public housing resident?

General Information

- How long have you lived in Hong Kong?
- How long have you lived in this estate?
- Where did you move from?
- What level of studies have you achieved?
- What do you do for a living?