

## **Tapescript DL 1.2**

### **Interview between Erica Laine and Nuala Rooney.**

E : I have with me today in the studio Nuala Rooney who is Assistant professor of Design at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University School of Design where she teaches in the area of Interior Design.

Now Nuala how long have you been in Hong Kong?

N : I have been in Hong Kong for ten years.

E : Ten years? That's quite a long time—lots of changes.

N : Yes, a lot of changes in design especially. People are much more aware of design than before.

E : Well, that's interesting, and you're now working on your PhD thesis, aren't you?

N : That's right.

E : And what's that called?

N : The title of the thesis is Spatial Representation in Hong Kong Public Housing.

E : Right, so you're looking specifically at public housing and what people do with quite small spaces?

N : Yes, I'm specifically looking at the older style housing, not the very oldest style: the Mark I, II, III, IV, V, and VI but there is the slab block and the twin tower. I'm not concerned with the very new blocks which would be The Trident and The Harmonies, they are designed to a much bigger scale.

E : So, how many square feet are you looking at? About what sort of size?

N : Mostly in the area of two to three hundred square feet.

E : Alright. And housing how many people?

N : It varies—the families that I have been concentrating on have been living there for a longer time, so some of the family members have grown up and moved out, but no less than four or five in a flat.

E : Of that size.

N : Yes.

E : Right, okay. Why is this interesting, do you think? The way that people use such small spaces?

N : Well, Hong Kong is certainly one of the densest places in the world and Hong Kong public housing is quite a phenomenon because it houses half the population of Hong Kong.

E : Oh really?

N : Yes. It's quite significant and yet there is nothing written about the way people live in public housing in Hong Kong. There are very few photographs and very few documentaries and people don't seem to take it very seriously, which seems very strange to me when so many people are living like this. I think it's something we should concentrate on—to learn more about the way people live in Hong Kong.

E : As you say it's particular to Hong Kong with its dense population and I'm very interested that you say that half the population live in public housing, that's certainly a larger percentage that I thought it could have been. When you say that different generations grow up in the public housing, I think you've brought along some photographs that show two families living side by side?

N : Yes. What I'm looking at is long-term families and in these photographs you can see identical flats right next door to each other, and in one flat we have an older family with grown up children, children (if you can call them that!) in their twenties and in the other flat we have a family with younger children, where the eldest child might be ten years old. And you can see the difference.

E : Yes. I mean I'm looking at the photos now and in the flat which has been lived in by the family for the longest time, with the grown up children, there are a lot of possessions in the flat, aren't there? They've got a lot of things they have to somehow put into the space and it's almost as if every time they've brought something into the flat, they've just put it down somewhere.

N : Yes. I think in this family it shows that there came a point where they just couldn't cope any further with the problem of organising the space, especially when there are adults with their own possessions and needs, it just becomes too much, and what you can see here is the folding beds. This is also something very popular in Hong Kong — it makes a very good use of space, it makes a space more flexible and that's important when you're living in a small scale housing.

E : So the space can be used for many different — in many different ways: so the bed is folded up and only unfolded when needed.

N : Yes, that's right.

E : Do you think the people in the flat where as we can see the space is very cluttered and it's difficult to imagine how people could move around and use all the things there. Do you think people would want to be helped with organizing their space? Or do you think they've stopped noticing?

N : I think this family had stopped noticing. They live next door to the other family and they were quite proud of the other family which was their son and daughter in law. They could see that this was a nice place to live. They were aware that both

flats were very small, but in the other family, the younger family, the mother was very organised and she had a lot of control over the space and see that the space is very ordered and very neat? And of course the difference here is that she can control how much "stuff" is actually brought into the home, and can throw things out.

E : Right, yes, I'm just looking here and I've just noticed that in the first flat we're talking about, in the alcove, there is a bunkbed but it's absolutely covered in possessions and in this; the more modern approach if you like; or the more organised approach to the flat the bed is being used as almost a play place as well as a sleeping place.

N : As you can see there are different styles of bunkbeds. The older style bunkbed, the one that is very crowded and very cluttered is the more traditional type. Now that's been in Hong Kong around forty years. It's not something that people throw out, they don't go out of fashion as such. Whereas in the other household you can see the whole space has been co-ordinated: that the colours and materials are much lighter and that the parents there have selected furniture which makes a very good use of space and the children's bed, the children's bunkbed here actually has little cupboards and drawers built into the space and it looks like it's a double bunkbed, but in fact it's triple.

E : Oh! Goodness!

N : Yes. Down below they pull out what is almost a shelf that the third child sleeps on lower down.

E : Do you think it's the result of having living in the flat next door that made this young couple aware of what they didn't want and how to approach it because it is the same space they're looking at.

N : I think a lot of it has to do with generation and spatial experience that older people and especially the parents in the first flat. Their experience of spaces would not be, maybe, as sophisticated as the younger couple who would probably have been to different types of restaurants, different types of hotels, they might have been wider and more extensive experience of different types of spaces. They are, I would say, more "Design aware", whereas the older couple it might never have been important to them because it was never a concept that they would ever have thought of. When they came to Hong Kong, I imagine after the war—the Pacific War, their main aim, I would guess, would be survival. In that case Design is a younger generation thing.

E : Is it something that people have to have time to think about? I mean, you're saying survival, yes absolutely, just get in there have a roof over your head gather your few possessions around you, you don't really have time to think about anything else. It takes time, doesn't it? To think through what you're going to do with the space.

N : Yes, you need to have a good analytical mind about what the possibilities are and how to maintain a good circulation within a space, and you can see in this family they've kept quite an open space in the middle and you do not see a dining table.

E : No, that's true.

N : So they would probably fold up the table during the day and only take it out at night. What you can see is there are two children doing homework in fold-up tables as well.

E : Yes, while others are watching television and it appears that someone is lying on a bed or a sofa.

N : It's a bed. I guess the other thing that is pretty noticeable especially to an outsider is that in Hong Kong public housing there are not always walls internally, so that there might not be as much privacy as you might expect in say a western style home.

E : Right.

N : Now this family we asked people why they did not partition the space and she understood that yes, they would like to have a separate room, but in doing so it means that their ventilation is not so good and the bedroom would become darker and, in fact, as you can see here it is more open, it's more spacious and all they have for privacy is a curtain that goes around the bed and so, of course, the family have to sacrifice something.

E : Yes, well, that's very interesting—the fact that we have two photos showing the same space and with such different uses of the space. I hope you're going to be able to write things about this particular area of public housing in Hong Kong, not just in your thesis but in a way that perhaps everyone can read about and understand what people are doing with these very small spaces. Do you think that you will be able to write something which is accessible to more people apart from your thesis?

N : Oh, yes, I think a thesis is something that sits in a library! But actually the content is much more direct and when I originally started doing this project, what I wanted to do was to make people more aware of the spaces that they live in, so that they could feel that they can organise the space and that they can and they do—or they are designers!

E : That's very interesting. Thank you very much.