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PRIVATE INITIATIVE



Exchange Square, Hong Kong. Image courtesy HKPSI.

PIAZZA HONG KONG

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Founded in April 2011, the *Hong Kong Public Space Initiative* (HKPSI) is the brainchild of Karl Chan, a young Hong Kong-born graduate of Cornell University. Chan says that before he studied abroad and travelled to Italy, he wasn't aware of the concept of public space. "Public space is a place that can encourage social interaction. A landmark that can encourage discussion between people. For example, the *Piazza del Campo* in Siena, Italy, is so inspiring. Whether you are a resident or a tourist, everybody hangs out there. It is where all the major public activities take place. People are

reading, sketching, and enjoying the sunshine. I wondered why I never saw the same scene in Hong Kong, with the exception of the Philippine helpers' community making great use of public areas on their day off. Why doesn't Hong Kong have any public space that we are proud of?"

"Technically, public space is a place you can enter without charge, and anyone, regardless of their background, can do whatever they want in it as long as it is lawful," Chan states, but he concludes that the essence of public space is its usage, which is vital to community bonding. "I feel that the major problem is that Hong Kong people don't really know what public space is, because this idea is not part of our education," he says, fearful of the city turning into "just another big shopping mall."

With a keen sense of civic spirit, he set out gathering a group of like-minded graduates. He trawled through university mailing lists, targeting geography, sociology, and architecture faculties. "I outlined what I wanted to do, and organised an info-session. Out of the 30 who replied, 12 agreed to become committee members," he recalls. A geography graduate of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, Danica Chan joined as a co-founder and vice-president of internal affairs. She recalls her thoughts at the time Chan contacted her, "I started to re-think the issue of public space in Hong Kong, and even though it doesn't have any widely recognised ones, street life is really great and vibrant. I thought we should try and preserve the old living lifestyle, especially the street markets."

HKPSI is a charity who "...wants to focus on education in secondary schools, because we think the ultimate root of the problem is the lack of knowledge, including amongst teachers, so we go and do talks and conduct field-trips, and debate activities," says Chan. The organisation leads school trips to public spaces, such as to Statue Square, Central Pier, and the IFC Podium Garden. So far, three schools have committed to more trips and current committee members are returning to their old schools to promote educational activities. The charity is also drafting train-the-trainer programmes so that more volunteers can get involved. School teachers are contemplating how to incorporate public art – a concept even less familiar than public space – as a possible module for the newly implemented *Liberal Arts* syllabus. (Starting this September, all undergraduate courses will take four years to complete, and students, irrespective of their major, will be expected to study Humanities, Arts and Natural Science modules – to be 'more rounded' students).

Chan looked for funding privately, cold-calling potential investors, and eventually he received his first backing from Christine Loh, founder of

the public policy think tank, *Civic Exchange*, followed by businessman Allan Zeman (aka Mr. Lan Kwai Fong), and Ada Wong, a solicitor of Hong Kong's Supreme Court and member of the Art Museum Advisory Panel. It is the sponsorship from individual patrons that funds HKPSI programmes.

Currently, HKPSI is hard at work developing an online public space database. Chan explains, "If someone wants to visit a public space they can search up each profile, with details of opening hours, special features, facilities, accessibility and history. So far only committee members have assessed spaces, but we eventually want to train more volunteers to be assessors, especially since the usage of each public space may change according to the season and the time of day." As Chan steers his nascent organisation into the public eye, it will continue to explore different ways of educating the public.



Central Market, Hong Kong. Image courtesy HKPSI.

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www.hkpsi.org and www.facebook.com/HKPSI