

Hong Kong

Michelle Lam

The planes don't land in the centre of the city anymore, but the shotcrete-covered hill that I've known as the chequerboard still stands as a beacon, the highest point in Kowloon Tsai Park. The aviation navigation lights were dismantled from the top of the hill when the airport moved in 1998. Yet the unmistakable red-and-white squares painted on the south side of the hill remain, just as the old gong-gongs and poh-pohs unfailingly turn up every dawn to scale the service steps up the concrete hill, defying padlocked fences and arthritis to face the city with their morning exercises.

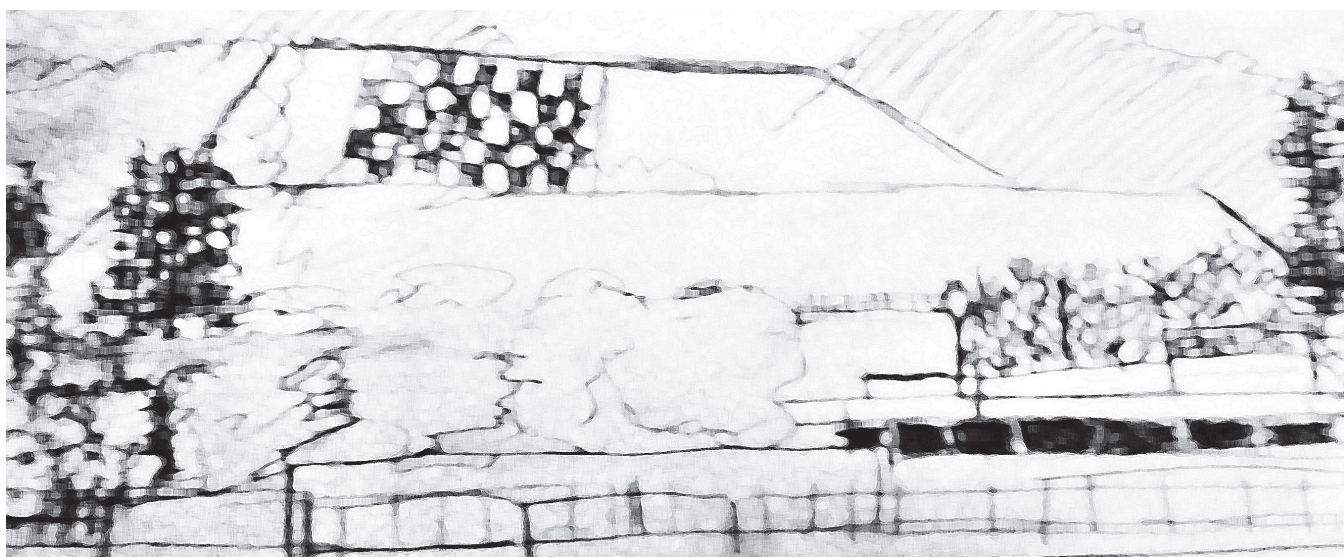
I usually catch only the tail end of this activity as I turn up for a morning tennis session, futilely trying to beat the summer's heat. The courts are at the foot of this hill, and the elastic pok-pok-pok of the tennis balls resound and bound off the steep concrete behind.

I've been coming to this park for years; the chequerboard backdrop to years of tennis lessons, family strolls, school sports meets and swimming galas. Even before Hong Kong's public works movement produced this urban park, the red-and-white squares were there to guide landing jets and

my mother, then a child, scrambling to keep up on the way to the market. In the 1960s, my mother's family lived in a squatter settlement, which was separated from the market by the empty expanse that would become the park.

The chequerboard is my favourite vantage point in the vertical city of Hong Kong. Due to the flight path to the old city-centre airport, this area of Kowloon is uncharacteristically low-rise, offering unobstructed views out towards the typhoon shelters of Victoria Harbour and the glass and steel skyscrapers on the Island beyond. From here I could survey my city and feel its activity, from harbour to airport to streets to public park.

In recent years this depth of vision has diminished somewhat as pencil towers pierce the urban fabric and encroach on the park. Relaxed building height limits and seemingly endless real estate profits are steadily displacing the three-storey shop-house with thirty-storey misnomers such as "Urban Loft Living". From the chequerboard I can't see as far out in space or as far back in time anymore. Yet like no other place in the world could you sum up the experience of a city, my city, in one moment here.



Drawing by Michelle Lam 2012, edited by Katharine Pan