

By Kenneth Baker

It takes some study to recognize what makes Michael Wolf's photographs of Hong Kong so extraordinary. Other contemporary photographers also have made large prints that startle us with their density of visual and sociological detail. And others compose pictures, as Wolf does, with an eye to the abstract beauty of a print's surface design in tension with its subject matter. But whereas a photographer such as Andreas Gursky may overwhelm us with the number of people in a crowd scene or with the population that a landscape of garbage evokes, stretching to the horizon, Wolf makes a famously overcrowded city appear almost abandoned, whether he takes a long view of it or an intimate one.

One of the first pictures in *Hong Kong: Front Door/Back Door* dramatizes this paradoxical quality. It shows a plastic chair, empty, on a grassy promontory. The chair overlooks great clusters of tall residential towers that jut from the earth like some geologic anomaly. No telling how many people this picture takes in, boxed within their tiny living spaces, but we see no one.

The chair, like several others in *Hong Kong: Front Door/Back Door*, makes offhand reference to Wolf's earlier book, *Sitting in China*, a survey of the makeshift seating that he noticed everywhere in travels around the mainland. But in this particular picture, the chair implies a vanished observer, as empty chairs do in paintings by modern masters such as Henri Matisse, Pierre Bonnard and Richard Diebenkorn. (Of course, the landscape that encompasses a contemplative wanderer also has a much longer tradition in pre-modern Chinese painting.)

The empty chair in Wolf's picture, as in those of the Western modernists, might express the artist's wish to remove himself as mediator of the work, so as not to interfere with its truth. We sense that implication strongly in Wolf's work because even in the digital age the camera still stirs in us, and perhaps in him, a longing for objectivity. Yet images that come later in this book delight in the camera's capacity to withhold decisive information by framing, no matter how generously it provides what we might call the visual texture of veracity.

Various images describe the facades of monstrously tall and repetitive residential high-rise buildings, views cropped to make the structures appear as if they might extend indefinitely, upwards and down. The camera eye appears to hover, nearly causing us to lose the sense of which direction is earthward, even in the images that include the tops of street lights. These structures seem almost to float free of the planet and extend themselves in space without constraint. In one view, a few workers climbing about on sky-high scaffolding look as imperiled as space-walking astronauts. When full-bleed images face each other across the gutter, as they do at several points in *Hong Kong: Front Door/Back Door*, we almost cannot tell whether two images or one meet the eye. Many celebrated 20th century photographs glory in the cavernous immensity of big city buildings, especially those of New York and Chicago. In his Hong Kong pictures, Wolf purges high-rise architecture of the romance it possessed for photographers when the technology that made it possible — particularly the elevator — was new. Meanwhile the polarity between city and country gradually shifted during the 20th

century, despite sporadic attempts by totalitarian regimes to reverse that trend. In the year 2000, for the first time in history, more of the world's people lived in cities than outside them, just as the planet's population itself reached a new high.

To Western eyes the buildings in Wolf's high-rise pictures wear a double aspect of developer's dream and dweller's nightmare. Perhaps they express a European observer's - - that is, Wolf's own -- amazement at the seemingly uncritical transplantation of a familiar form of architectural monstrosity to a new terrain. They certainly imply an immense disparity in wealth between the proprietors of power in the local society and its ordinary citizens.

Major cities around the Western world have of necessity made their experiments with mass housing, building upwards and standardizing design and construction in response to the pressures of land values and shortages, rising population and purportedly progressive economics.

In America, many such housing projects devolved into scams for bilking federal and state governments that left impoverished residents to fight -- quite literally in view of the havens such buildings offered to youth gangs -- over turf in the underground economy of drug dealing and other illicit commerce.

In Western and Eastern Europe, such architecture evokes the crackup of modern utopian schemes to guarantee housing for all, the standardization of architecture presaging a standardization of personal identity in submission to social policy. These social failures played themselves out against an ideological background colored by the notion that the powerful now had the technical and psychological means to reinvent society at will.

Apparently Hong Kong people -- this phrase crops up frequently in commentary on the local culture -- coping with a unique urban geography, view matters differently, seeing a promise of convenience and personal independence in architecture that to Western eyes evokes deadening redundancy and impersonality.

Some of Wolf's photographs of the new Hong Kong high-rises look as if he took them while parachuting down among the buildings. The vertical facades, running edge-to-edge in several pictures, look almost like filmstrips laid edge to edge on an editing table. The images suggest an analogy between the variety of the lives these structures contain and the gradations of difference in the frames of a movie. A single film frame probably differs little from those that just precede or follow it, but the longer progress of images virtually guarantees a drama of differences.

Wolf's work expresses fascination not merely with the immensity and constraining design of Hong Kong's recent high-rise housing but with the leakage of individuality through these stultifying facades. A close look at any one of Wolf's architectural pictures discovers distinctions -- in window coverings, in laundry flapping like flags of personal identity, in makeshift exterior storage -- that wink out from the apparently identical apartments.

Donald Young writes that the new Hong Kong apartment architecture has turned the lives of Hong Kong people inside out: lack of privacy at home forces people into public expressions of their individuality. Wolf appears to corroborate this observation.

Probably no picture in this book rhymes more closely with his views of laundry-bannered apartment facades than the close-up of a metal screen through which a plant, mostly unseen behind the barrier, has threaded itself back and forth through the metal perforations, turning a barrier into a means of support.

Wolf's Hong Kong pictures show us almost no middle ground between the long shots of forbidding architecture and close-up views of things and situations on the street. These perspectives come into collision at several points in the book, most sharply in the page spread where a long view of blocky, older apartment towers abuts a close-up of an odd alcove, covered in chipped blue tile. The alcove appears derelict, yet it conceals a scavenged chair, reinforced with tape and elevated on a box, from which a sitter might see much without being seen.

The graphic collision of these two pictures implies no spatial connection between the places they show. We surmise instead that they present two facets of a way of life. *Hong Kong: Front Door/Back Door* repeatedly examines these facets in turn: fascinating traces of the private resourcefulness of people leading lives that have only crushingly anonymous architecture as a public face.

These life ways of Hong Kong people engender their own aesthetic, in Wolf's view. On a page immediately following the alcove view, we see a tight shot of what might be a hollowed-out light fixture hanging from a length of pipe on an exterior wall. Evidently with no intent to decorate, someone has looped through the disused frame various pieces of wire and plastic twine, storing them here for possible future use. This unself-conscious practicality has produced a sort of bouquet of colored streamers, leaving the bits of fastening visible for future use and incidentally brightening an otherwise bleak setting. Wolf discovers the same effect writ large, or slightly larger anyway, in a picture such as the cover image of *Hong Kong: Front Door/Back Door*, in which a pink bedspread pinned up to dry on a chain-link fence provides a bright false foreground for the grim landscape of apartment towers in the distance.

Other images in the book draw a parallel between natural and cultural formations. Turn, for example, from the black and white shot of a thicket of exterior plumbing to the color image, a couple of pages on, of a plant's root system so splayed against a wall that resembles a crowd of striding figures.

Many of Wolf's close-to-the-ground pictures recall classics of shop-window surrealism by photographers such as Manuel Alvarez Bravo, Andre Kertesz and Lee Friedlander. Consider Wolf's shot of a wall — interior or exterior? — on which an electric clock half-clad in bubble wrap hangs alongside a belted pair of pants, its cuffs snipped or torn away, draping from a chain of blue wire coat hangers. Below the clock, which reads "3:00," a drying glove flops over a purple cord, its splayed fingers saying "5." Were Wolf to tell us that he had contrived this arrangement rather than happened upon it, we would probably not believe him.

Some of Wolf's Hong Kong pictures can also bring to mind the works of certain 20th century artists not known primarily as photographers.

Anyone who examines the photographs of British sculptor Richard Wentworth or American sculptor and conceptual artist Sol LeWitt will find expressed in them a curiosity about patterns in things and what they suggest about people strikingly similar to Wolf's visual interests.

Someone familiar with Wentworth's photographs, told that he had taken Wolf's picture of a red-handled mop with its head slung over a wall bracket to dry, might well believe it. Ditto Wolf's shot of capped soft drink cups stuck, neither stored nor irrevocably discarded, in the grid of a chain link fence, and his pictures of carrying carts webbed with bungee cords and other fasteners, and of shoes stuffed behind wall-hugging pipes.

An even more striking fact: some of the things that catch Wolf's eye themselves resemble modern artworks. Those webbed carts bring to mind some of the entwined sculpture of American "funk" artist Bruce Conner and the strange, yarn-bound objects made by the late "outsider" artist Judith Scott (1943-2005).

Wolf's picture of things strung to dry before a wall layered with peeling posters recalls a famous shot of half-torn movie posters by Walker Evans. But Wolf's piece, because of its brilliant color and detail, also evokes the postwar European medium of "decollage" — tattered collages created by the deterioration of postings — invented, or proclaimed, by Jacques Villegle and Mimmo Rotella. Like those artists, Wolf saw in the texture of peeling information, a sediment of neighborhood history that no individual could contrive alone.

By their formal intelligence and acuity of observation, Wolf's Hong Kong pictures easily earn the status of artworks. But they do more, as suggested by the resemblance not only of their form but of their content to an improbable range of things in the modernist and post-modernist art landscape.

As he celebrates the uncharted cultural terrain of Hong Kong back alley sensibility, Wolf uses his camera in ways that reflect the power the act of observation has assumed in the visual arts around the turn of the millennium. Nearly a century ago, Marcel Duchamp granted us permission — to much permission, it now seems — to find art where we pleased, as long as we could account for our choices. Some decades later, the Fluxus artists in New York, Europe and Japan tried to erase the distance between art and non-art completely, reducing it to a matter of verbal fiat or mere mental posture.

Fluxus made the act of observation itself a creative technique. Surveying the city in which he lives, Wolf has inadvertently discovered — for us who do not live there — the fact that the cultural condition Fluxus proclaimed and mobilized now prevails globally, even in places and among people who neither know nor care anything about such esoteric matters.

The camera certifies observation, but it still leaves us to wonder — as Wolf does in *Hong Kong: Front Door/Back Door* — how much observation can certify.