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Failed pedestrian street experiments in high-density urban Asia: A matter of policies?

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ABSTRACT

Promoted by sustainable urban agendas and urged by global pandemic measures, street experiments (SE) are booming in Europe but remain latent in Asia. These experiments aim to reconfigure streets as more than spaces for motorized traffic movements, enabling a temporary urban paradigm shift. Such a shift involves balancing active mobility and public space uses in streets while envisioning radically different settings and uses. Recently, eminent scholars urged considering SE in connection to the system and planning framework within which SE are conceived to trace their *trajectories*. This article examines four decades of temporary-pedestrianization policies and planning instruments in Hong Kong, an Asian city representative of high-density urban environments with highly intensive use of road space and conservative and prescriptive planning. In doing so, the article identifies four *trajectories* and illustrates two emblematic cases: Chater Road, the first street temporarily pedestrianized under a commercial initiative, and Sai Yeung Choi Street South, a street pedestrianized under a government initiative, now turned back to its original function. The competing roles and practical uses that pedestrianized streets must fulfil partially determined their fate. However, the *trajectories* these cases followed also differ due to the contextual planning approach and decision-making process. The study contributes to scholarship on SE by shedding new light on the geographical context of high-density urban Asia, forwarding challenges that policy-makers might need to address in the planning and governance of SE in similar environments.

1. Introduction

Spurred by the ambitions of liveable and sustainable urban agendas and the COVID-19 pandemic, street experiments (SE) are burgeoning in several cities worldwide. By their very nature, these experiments offer a way to temporarily reshape streets as more than spaces that primarily channel vehicular movements, materializing a sustainable urban paradigm shift temporally and spatially. SE are defined as the "intentional, temporary change of the street use, regulation and/or form, aimed at exploring systemic change in urban mobility, away from streets for traffic, and towards streets for people" (Bertolini, 2020). In essence, SE aim to question the amount of street space assigned to motorized vehicles and temporarily display how urban streets can foster not only active mobility, but also diverse functions and uses in the public realm. The rationale behind that purpose lies in the idea that promoting public space is crucial to support sustainable urban mobility, and in turn, active mobility is an essential component of the public realm of liveable cities (Ravazzoli & Torricelli, 2017).

In urban planning, SE are peculiar cases as they require a planning approach that considers implementing a balance between an active mobility shift comprising walking, cycling, and public transport (and increasingly disruptive mobility technology), and options for public space use considering a plethora of commercial, leisure, sport and play, social interaction, civic, and political uses (Mehta, 2013; von Schönfeld & Bertolini, 2017). This balancing act is deemed radical due to it considering the actual state of mobility *and* public space while envisioning and forwarding future, radically different mobility and uses of streets. In this direction, recent evaluations of SE include the characteristic of radicality—consisting of experiments being fundamentally different from *dominant* auto-dominated *practices*—as pivotal for the transitional capacity of urban experiments (Roorda, 2014; Bertolini, 2020).

While previous studies highlighted that an important avenue for research on SE is considering that these measures "cannot be understood independent[ly] from the context and system in which they occur" (VanHoose et al., 2022, p. 14), research on the planning environment in

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which SE occur remains limited. Specifically, SE are not developed in a policy and planning framework vacuum. The growing scholarship on SE instead underlines the importance of understanding existing *regimes* and socio-economic orders within which experiments operate (Savini & Bertolini, 2019; VanHoose et al., 2022). Such an understanding entails recognizing that, over the last decades, streets have been largely planned and used according to policies, planning frameworks, and governance, prioritizing motorized vehicle traffic rights and automobility planning (Urry, 2016; Glaser et al., 2020).

In this auto-dominated planning landscape, when functionally complex SE (e.g., the re-purposing of entire streets) are eventually implemented and streets appear as more than a monofunctional road space for the flow of vehicles, the competing roles and public uses that streets need to fulfil and accommodate often become evident, but conflicts may arise and require institutional intervention (Parajuli & Pojani, 2018; Vitale Brovarone et al., 2023). Thus, experiments can take varied *trajectories* (Savini & Bertolini, 2019), and in some cases, SE can ultimately be reverted, potentially undermining other ensuing efforts toward sustainable urban transitions. The paths that experiments take can therefore be defined through several questions: How do planning processes acknowledge the different mobility and public space roles specific to the use of urban streets? What are the barriers that can influence the trajectories of SE when urban streets are re-purposed?

This article aims to address the above questions. It does so by examining the planning framework and process and by sketching the potential development paths of SE in the Asian urban context based on the understanding of the dominant regimes, the identification of four trajectories, and the analysis of two emblematic cases. While SE were primarily introduced in several cities across North America, South America, and Europe, the extension of these measures in Asia was comparatively limited. However, a persistent call exists to shift the geographic scope of urban mobility experimentation research beyond the Western context (Bertolini, 2020; Rui & Othengrafen, 2023). We argue that extending the spatial scope of research requires an in-depth understanding of the planning and regimes within which Asian urban experiments are implemented, considering specific characteristics of Asian urban streets. Such characteristics include long-established pedestrian environment planning processes and governance, and streets' functions and uses. Besides, such analysis involves "the interpretation and analysis of experiments from a systemic and therefore historical perspective" (Savini & Bertolini, 2019, p. 839).

This article reviews four decades of pedestrianization policies, planning, and instruments to highlight the changing aims and discourses. In doing so, we focus on the policy and planning evolution of pedestrianization, analogous to re-purposing entire streets, the most functionally articulated type of SE in Hong Kong. This city epitomizes a revelatory case (Yin, 2014) of a high-density Asian urban environment with intensive vehicular road use and scarce public space, where planning adheres to a *laissez-faire* regime (Tang, 2017). We investigate the degree of inclusiveness in the city street's plans for re-purposing, comprising the investigation of the two domains of public space and mobility and the involvement of stakeholders in the temporary pedestrianization process. Building on the scholarship on urban experimentations' *trajectories* (Savini & Bertolini, 2019), we sketch the path that temporary pedestrianized streets can take when the diverse uses and users of streets are not accounted for in planning. We identify four trajectories and focus on the development pathways of two emblematic cases that were not replicated (Flyvbjerg, 2011): (1) Sai Yeung Choi Street South, reclaimed for street performance and recently reverted to car use, and (2) Chater Road, the first temporarily pedestrianized street, incidentally established as a culturally diverse landscape.

This article is structured as follows. Section 1 reviews pedestrianization and SE as measures aiming to reinstate the diverse roles of streets and focuses on the concept of *trajectories*. In that context, the barriers and efforts reported by scholarship in establishing Asian streets as spaces balancing the two domains of mobility and stationary uses, and the understanding of urban experiments are introduced. Section 2 then defines the methods and material adopted in the multi-embedded research design. In Section 3 the Hong Kong pedestrianization policy case study is introduced, and the processes through which these measures were conceived are investigated. We then sketch the potential trajectories drawing on two extreme case studies. Finally, the Discussion and Conclusion, Sections 4 and 5, respectively, reflect on potential barriers to SE in high-density contexts and identify future directions for research.

1.1. Streets as settings of urban experiments

SE emerged as transition experiments (Roorda, 2014) to test alternative, radical, and transformative urban planning paradigms to include active mobility and public space functions in streets. SE comprise the following measures, listed by increasing functional complexity: re-marking of streets, re-purposing of parking, and partial or full re-purposing of streets (Bertolini, 2020). The latter, akin to temporary pedestrianization, epitomizes the extreme case where active mobility and public space domains appear in and compete for urban space. However, historically, pedestrianization differs in that it was developed to address a broader array of environmental (Nieuwenhuijsen & Khreis, 2016), social and economic (He & Wu, 2005; Harvey, 2012) targets. Pedestrianization is devised in different forms—from one street to an entire area, as permanent or temporary, with some level of streetscape intervention and connection to transport links—according to historical, cultural, and political agendas (Yuen & Chor, 1998; Hass-Klau, 2015).

In the extant research, SE have been analyzed to evaluate their transformative potential (Glaser & Krizek, 2021; Hagen & Tennøy, 2021; Verhulst et al., 2023) across five defining characteristics: their being radical, challenge-driven, feasible, strategic, and communicative (Roorda, 2014). Reported challenges connected to SE implementation include institutional barriers and existing regimes limiting the feasibility of SE, the disconnection from long-term sustainable mobility efforts, and reported concerns about socio-economic change with negative impacts in affected urban areas (VanHoose et al., 2022).

Savini and Bertolini (2019) forward an analytical framework to examine urban experiments' trajectories or development pathways. The study suggests analyzing how experiments are carried out considering three interdependent dimensions: systemic dimension, social actors, and the process occurring in the physical space. Some of the identified trajectories of experiments are death or suppression, marginalization, assimilation, and transformation. In this study, we analyze such *trajectories* in an underexplored geographical context. In line with Savini and Bertolini (2019), such examination entails identifying the relational network of actors, the power dynamics among them, and how social practices attempt to contest or reproduce existing social norms and spaces.

1.2. Situating SE in Asian urban and planning context

In Asian cities, economic development and policies promoting rapid motorization have progressively jeopardized socially, economically, and environmentally sustainable non-motorized transportation modes, such as walking (Hook & Replogle, 1996). Pedestrian trips have been increasingly shrinking over time—in Shanghai, the pedestrian mode share dropped from 38 % in 1986 to 10.4 % in 2004; similarly, in Delhi, the share of pedestrian mode went from 39 % in 2002 to 21 % in 2008—in favor of private vehicles but also public transport (Leather et al., 2011). While Hong Kong is no exception, the city has one of the world's lowest private motor vehicle shares at 12 % (Transport Department, 2014), making Hong Kong the ideal urban environment for studying pedestrian spaces and their potential upgrade in Asia. In fact, the pedestrian travel share is still relatively high in Hong Kong (11 %) and in many other high-density Asian cities, where most walking trips complement public transport ones (Leather et al., 2011; Transport

Department, 2014).

Despite such potential advantages, Asia has "a lack of relevant policies, dedicated institutions, and political support that cater to the needs of pedestrians" (Leather et al., 2011). Moreover, Asian cities often lack proper guidelines on the implementation of SE due to being prone to an outdated understanding of pedestrians as *vehicles* and consequently putting forward pedestrian traffic management measures rather than placemaking initiatives centered on stationary uses of the street realm (Leather et al., 2011; Glaser et al., 2020). Eventually, high density and the scarcity of public space—2.7 m^2 per capita in Hong Kong—are crucial factors in turning streets into spaces highly contested by several competing uses and stakeholders (Villani & Talamini, 2021). Those conditions make the path of SE's existence highly challenging.

Hickman and Huaylla Sallo (2022) posit that street space reallocation project plans and implementations are often hindered by conflicting interests of stakeholders. The success of these projects can be achieved only by stepping away from a purely technical focus and empowering the collaborative potential of the political process of citizen participation. Such a move implies focusing on governance and creating the systemic condition for a deliberative planning process (Hickman & Huaylla Sallo, 2022). Against such a background, most Asian cities are poorly equipped, often adopting a *conforming* planning system. These systems strive to "'conform' a single project to a collective strategy," while a *performing* one encourages "those projects capable of 'performing' a collective strategy" (Janin Rivolin, 2008). The second model allows more flexibility and interpretation, and is thus more prone to accommodate an explorative search for solutions to problems, as in the case of SE (Balz, 2018).

With some exceptions—such as Singapore (Ng, 1999)—most Asian countries adopt a regulatory system "based on administrative law and a written constitution" delivering "clear development rights and floor space limits" (Punter, 2007). Regulatory zoning is typically applied with a high degree of flexibility, yet plan amendments often lack transparency and are prone to speculative interests, as in the case of Taipei and Hong Kong (Ng, 1999). Moreover, Asian countries, especially developing ones, are often characterized by a pro-development bias and lack a tradition of resource distribution through the spatial fixing of welfare—what Munarin and Tosi, 2014 call the *welfare space*. In this context, public space amelioration through pedestrianization or traffic-calming measures is often proposed in association with urban renewal projects aimed to produce economic gains through real estate or commercialism (Chan, 2023).

1.3. Urban streets in Asia: From pedestrianization to urban experiments

Asian streets, particularly in East Asian cities, are largely underrepresented in practice and research on SE (SET, 2022; Rui & Othengrafen, 2023). On one hand, temporary public uses are part of established daily tactics of street reclamation in the face of urban constraints (Chalana & Hou, 2016), and informal temporary urbanism has long been a target of scrutiny and control by formalized planning practices (Hou, 2016). On the other hand, in recent years, urban experimentalism has been surging in East Asia (Heilmann, 2008; Bai et al., 2010; Nam & Lee, 2023). Clear recent examples are the pedestrian and local environment regeneration projects in Seoul (Nam & Lee, 2023) and the micro-regeneration projects in inner-city neighborhoods of major Chinese cities (Xu & Lin, 2019; Wang et al., 2022).

Previously, temporary pedestrianization has been implemented since the late 1990s in cities such as Singapore, Taipei, Hong Kong, and different cities in China and Thailand. Studies report that, in that geographical context, the aims of these measures have included reducing car-dependency and improving pedestrian safety and activities (Yuen & Chor, 1998; Boonjubun, 2017) promoting heritage conservation (Parajuli & Pojani, 2018); and more recently, promoting city branding and redevelopment (He & Wu, 2005; Barber, 2020). In these cases, pedestrianization is often a top-down government initiative whose processes and post-implementation conflicts are underinvestigated by scholarly research.

In major Chinese cities, recent policy shifts toward the micro-regeneration approach are conceived as small scale, heritage-oriented, and participatory-inspired experiments in infill redevelopment (Wang et al., 2022; Wu et al., 2022). Such experiments are enacted as exceptions to the regulatory frameworks (Yang & Zhang, 2023). Some of these projects in Shanghai (Xu & Lin, 2019; Chen & Qu, 2020; Zhang & Zhang, 2022), Beijing (Wei, 2022), and Shenzhen are promoted by quasi-state institution or private entities; such projects include the re-marking of streets and the re-purposing of parking spaces and underused public and green spaces through public furniture and lightning upgrades. In this study, we aim to contribute to the limited body of work questioning the experimental character (Yang & Zhang, 2023), participatory approach, and power dynamics of SE in the East Asian context (Xu & Lin, 2019).

2. Material and methods

This study applies a multi-embedded case study design (Yin, 2014), a qualitative research method, to examine (1) the historical overview of interrelation between the two domains of public space and mobility in pedestrianization planning and (2) the resulting extreme *trajectories* that pedestrianization measures can take in Asian environments. The methods adopted for this study include documentary analysis supplemented by semi-structured in-depth interviews with expert informants. Thematic content analysis (Gaber, 2018), a qualitative method previously used for textual analysis of urban policy (Gössling, 2013), is employed to examine pedestrianization planning documents and the transcribed interviews of key stakeholders.

The multi-embedded case study proves helpful in gaining an in-depth understanding of emblematic cases, such as pedestrianization planning and implementation in the Asian urban environment. Hong Kong is set as our case study representative of a high-density Asian urban environment with highly intensive vehicular road use (Murakami & He, 2018), scarcity of public space, segregation of transport means, and diverse users and uses reclaiming streets (Villani & Talamini, 2020). In this context, planning adheres to a *laissez-faire* regime (Tang, 2017). In line with previous research (Savini & Bertolini, 2019), we identify four representative cases of SE trajectories. We focus on two examples, the Chater Road pedestrianized street and the Sai Yeung Choi Street South former pedestrianized street, which are set as the unit of analysis to exemplify the extreme *trajectories* that pedestrianization measures can take. Although pedestrianization planning goals were devised to primarily enhance pedestrian safety, both cases eventually exhibited the potential of temporary pedestrianization to provide settings for diverse public uses and active mobility. However, the cases differ in how the relevant government bodies reacted to unplanned uses and the process of street management.

For part (1), an inventory of city-level pedestrianization planning documents was compiled to review the involved stakeholders, purposes, and implementation criteria, with a topical focus on highlighting the policy content on active mobility and public space provision. The textual *corpus* considered includes policy papers, planning guidelines, legislative council papers, and other material made available online from official Hong Kong government sources. Thus, the corpus ($n = 10$) spans from 1999 to 2022, covering the entire period of the special administrative region-level pedestrianization planning initiative. The textual corpus collected was classified into categories of meaning to identify recurring themes (Bernard & Ryan, 1998; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). For the content analysis, the *corpus* of compiled planning policies and documents was split into four parts: rationale, governmental and private bodies involved, public engagement process and implementation guidelines and assessment. The pedestrianization documents were screened for content relating to these four components, which were then assessed to determine the primary intended usage and function related

to active mobility or public space.

For part (2), the identification of the four cases representing the SE trajectories was derived by a review of the planned pedestrianization measures examined throughout part (1). We forward an in-depth examination of two pedestrianization measures that were not replicated. Additional data related to the two cases was gathered from official government sources, including legislative council papers, environmental complaints, and news articles ($n = 13$). The trajectories of the two case studies were examined by screening the *corpus* for content related to the three dimensions of analysis highlighted in Section 1.1 (Savini & Bertolini, 2019): (1) the relational network of actors, (2) the power dynamics among actors, and (3) the social practices contesting or reproducing existing norms and space.

Additionally, we conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews ($n = 7$) with highly knowledgeable stakeholders, including expert informants on the local urban design and planning milieu (Ehnert et al., 2018) to elicit expert opinions on the underlying rationale that guided pedestrianization planning over time and to provide the context of the pedestrianization process and street use. The interview material was also used to triangulate the information gathered from documentary sources. Interviews were conducted in English between September 2019 and August 2021, and each interview lasted about 45 minutes. Interviewees comprise the following stakeholders: a former director of the Planning Department (I01), a senior engineer of the Transport Department (I02), a transport planner of a major international consulting firm collaborating with the Transport Department (I03), a director of a large planning consultancy firm and former president of the Hong Kong Institute of Planners and the Hong Kong Institute of Urban Design (I04), a lead researcher of a local placemaking consultancy (I05), a vice chairman of a local district council and chief executive officer of a non-profit organization devoted to urban design (I06), and a leader of one marginalized group's empowerment (street sleepers) NGO (I07). A standard iterative interview material analysis process requires two researchers' involvement (Parajuli & Pojani, 2018). Thus, one researcher first made an inventory of the material and selected content related to the pedestrianization phase and case studies. De-briefings and discussions with the second researcher then produced in-depth data interpretation.

3. Findings

In Hong Kong, permanent, temporary, and traffic-calming pedestrianization projects are planned by the Transport Department and the Planning Department (HKSAR Planning Department, 2001a), who compete in planning such measures. Projects are implemented on a trial basis and the implementation is responsibility of the Transport Department and the Highways Department. However, the actors and institutions involved in this measure have changed over time. The selection of streets for pedestrianization is based on areas where high pedestrian flow is observed rather than a recognition of socio-spatial practices. Regarding the timing of pedestrianization projects, most were completed in the second half of the 2000s. A new phrase of proposed pedestrianization measures was anticipated in the late 2010s, spurred by traffic congestion growing at an *alarming rate* (Transport Advisory Committee, 2014), but was never implemented.

Five phases of pedestrianization initiatives were identified through our analysis, and for each phase, we highlight how policy and planning considered or overlooked the promotion of active mobility and public space uses in the streets (see Table 1). The first phase (1980–1998) included a project aimed at commercial promotion. The second phase (1999–2000) primarily promoted pedestrian safety and mobility and saw most pedestrianization measures implemented. In the third phase (2001–2015), the commercial rationale was combined with pedestrian circulation. During the fourth phase (2016), the aim of pedestrian streets was to provide pedestrian accessibility in transport environments. The fifth and latest phase (2017–2022) consists of one consultancy study concerning pedestrianization planning with a broader scope, although the study was terminated before implementation.

3.1. Phase one

In the 1980s, the first pedestrianization project in Hong Kong was forwarded as a downtown revitalization plan to attract customers to Chater Road in the financial district of Hong Kong, which emptied after office hours. The project was initiated by a leading central district landlord, who aimed to entice wealthy visitors to the high-end retail area through cultural events (Constable, 2009). This temporary pedestrianization represents a planning rationale primarily following commercial interests. The aim was to create space for commercial uses for events as a concession to the high-end retail tenants. Progressively and without any planning input (I01) Chater Road has become a public space for diverse cultural meetings in Hong Kong, during vehicle-restricted hours (Law, 2002; Constable, 2009; Lorenz, 2009) (see Chater Road case study).

3.2. Phase two

The first comprehensive pedestrianization policy was the *Third Comprehensive Transport Study* in 1999 by the Transport Department

Table 1
Summary of the five phases of pedestrianisation planning in Hong Kong.

(a) Historical overview				(b) Trajectories	
Phase and Function	Year	Title	Type	Case	Trajectory type
Phase one: commercial	1980–1998	N/A	N/A	Chater Road pedestrianised area	Marginalization
Phase two: Pedestrian safety and mobility	1999	Third Comprehensive Transport Study (CTS-3)	Planning Strategy	Sai Yeung Choi Street South pedestrianised area	Death/ suppression
	1999	The 1999 Policy Address: "Quality People Quality Home"	Chief Executive Policy Address		
	2000	Legislative Council Panel on Transport "Pedestrian Schemes"	Legislative Council Paper	Temple Street pedestrian area Tung Choi Street pedestrianised area	Transformation
Phase three: commercial and pedestrian circulation	2001–2015	Study on Planning for Pedestrians	Planning Strategy	Jardine's Crescent pedestrianised street the Lee Tung Avenue Project	Assimilation
Phase four: Pedestrian mobility and accessibility	2016	Hong Kong 2030+: Planning and Urban Design for a Liveable High-Density City	Planning Strategy		
Phase five: Pedestrian mobility and accessibility	2017	The 2017 Policy Address: "We Connect for Hope and Happiness"	Chief Executive Policy Address		
	2018–2022	Consultancy Study on Enhancing Walkability in Hong Kong	Consultancy Study		

(HKSAR Transport Department, 1999). While representing the first initiative of the government that considered the promotion of pedestrian priority in planning (I01), the policy was largely a measure to control vehicular traffic. As I01 notes, in detailed studies, government departments found that, "by closing some of the side streets [to vehicles], you enhance the efficiency of vehicular [traffic] on the [main] street, thus reducing traffic congestion. So that is [a] win-win situation." Thus, the primary aim was to reduce accidents between vehicles and pedestrians while allowing at least partial vehicle access rather than encouraging an active-mobility shift. In this direction, the streets selected for permanent or temporary pedestrianization were in urban districts (Causeway Bay, Mongkok, and Tsim Sha Tsui) with high pedestrian flow and underperforming air quality levels (HKSAR, 1999). The selection and assessment of a pedestrianization measure (permanent, temporary, or traffic calming) and the trial extension were solely based on traffic impact considerations (loading and unloading access and post-implementation traffic assessment) (HKSAR Legislative Council, 2000).

3.3. Phase three

In phase three, a market-influenced pedestrianization policy for commercial and pedestrian circulation was introduced. The stakeholders involved in pedestrianization include the government with the Transport and Planning Department, local governmental offices, leading retail landlords, and the public involved through open public consultations (Fig. 1a). In this phase, *The Study on Planning for Pedestrians* (HKSAR Planning Department, 2001b), developed by the Planning Department, promoted pedestrian safety, mobility, and the creation of space for leisure activities through the involvement of the private commercial sector. *The Study on Planning for Pedestrians* is still referenced in pedestrian planning today. As I04 summarizes, the involvement of a broader array of commercial partners reinforces the direction toward a "non interventionist system that is [geared toward] commercial interests." While the aim of pedestrianization includes public space creation, the planning rationale relates to envisioning retail opportunities and viability. The stakeholders involved are more comprehensive-compared to previous phases- and include public consultation. However, the interviewees highlight the limits of this method (I01, I03, I04, I06, I07): "[T]he planning system itself has never been around that much public consultation. We, as planners […] or the government, in the course of our plan […], have to go through three public consultations. I would go as far as to say they make absolutely no difference at all" (I04).

3.4. Phase four

With phase four, the rationale of pedestrianization is extended to pedestrian accessibility, reinforcing the policy focus on pedestrian mobility. The *2016 Hong Kong 2030+: Planning and Urban Design for a Liveable High-Density City* (HKSAR, 2016), developed by the Development Bureau and the Planning Department, focuses on new areas of development where pedestrian accessibility is facilitated by public furniture near transportation hubs. In these new areas, "the whole open space system [is] connecting the railway station with the high-density development, which is close to it, in a 500-meter radius" (I01). Traffic-calming initiatives (2005–2011) were implemented in inner-city neighborhoods as measures adopted to enhance pedestrian mobility and safety rather than to improve public space availability (HKSAR Transport Department, 2019b).

3.5. Phase five

In the 2017 policy address (HKSAR, 2017b) the chief executive announced the latest city-level walkability study (HKSAR Transport Department, 2017). By involving international private consultants in transport and urban planning, urban design, and placemaking (HKSAR Transport Department, 2019a), the study commissioned by the Transport Department aimed to make Hong Kong a *world-class walkable city* through short-, medium-, and long-term measures, which included temporary pedestrianization in two pilot areas envisioned with suggestive project renderings that included bicycles (HKSAR, 2018). The study involved a larger group of stakeholders compared to phase four and required the appointment of private consultants (see Fig. 1). Further, the study included an experimental approach to pedestrianization and extended the rounds of public engagement and online consultation processes. While promoting pedestrian space connectivity, safety, comfort, and technological enhancement (I02), the characteristics of the envisioned public space strongly relate to the pedestrian mobility domain (I02) and exclude the on-street promotion of cycling (I03). The newly introduced experimental approach to pedestrianization involved government planners, placemaking designers, and residents in

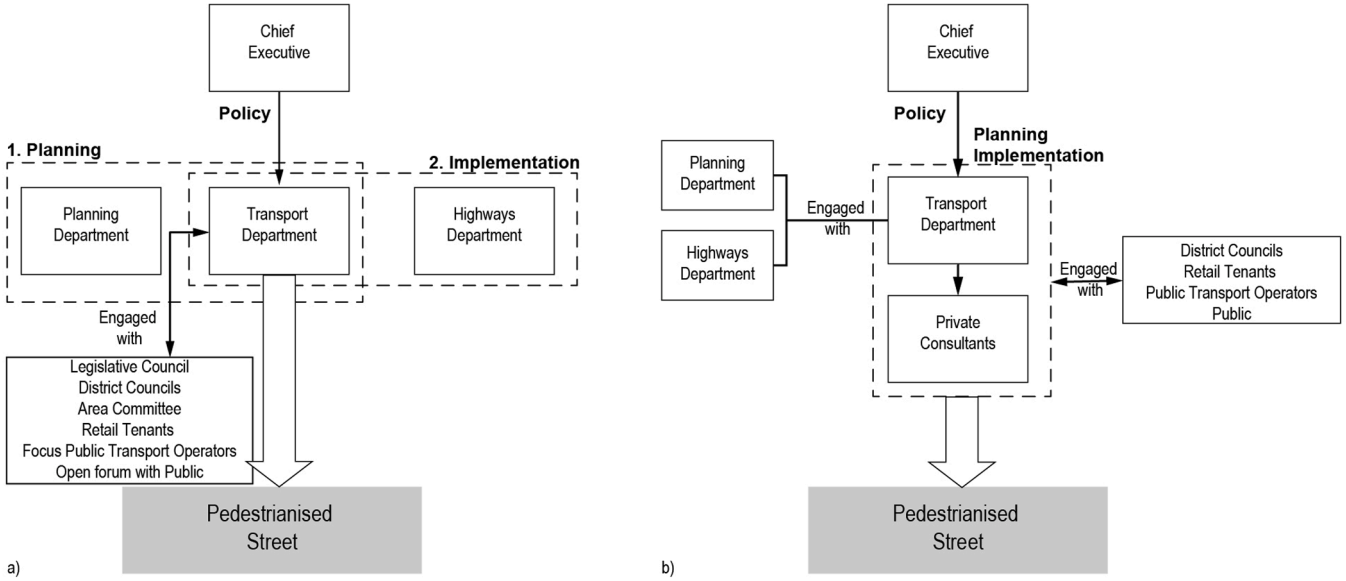

Fig. 1. (a) Pedestrianization planning process and stakeholders involved through phase four, and (b) pedestrianization planning process and stakeholders involved in phase five.

testing prototypes and projects, including child-friendly streets in pilot school zones (I05). However, safety concerns and a lack of interdepartmental cooperation were significant barriers to further implementing the experiments (I05). Interviewees note the limit of the public engagement exercise due to limiting the inclusion of more vulnerable groups (I03, I07) and having a purely informative character aimed at building public consensus for the pilot area proposals (I03) rather than allowing decision-making. Eventually, the pedestrianization of the pilot areas was not implemented. The 2019–2020 social unrest and the following COVID-19 pandemic further contributed to setting pedestrianization projects aside—in contrast to Europe, where the pandemic catalyzed several SE, Hong Kong saw the pandemic result in the total halting of pedestrianization initiatives.

3.6. Trajectories of pedestrianized streets

The policy and planning analysis indicated that, in Hong Kong, forwarding active mobility and promoting public space uses (excluding commercial uses) are less accounted for at the pedestrianization planning and implementation stage. Government officials remark that diverse public uses are still allowed in the pedestrianized street as long as the uses abide by the law (I01, I02) and that different departments are responsible for "regulat[ing] the activities and conditions of pedestrian streets and […] jointly manage, regulate and monitor [them]" (I02). Nevertheless, pedestrianized streets are not exempted from contrasting and competing public uses, overlooked at the planning level, that materialize when diverse social practices reclaim streets temporarily closed to vehicular traffic.

Often, such contrasting and competing public uses affect the trajectory of SE. Building on the classification of the *trajectories* of urban experiments put forward by Savini and Bertolini (2019), it is possible to identify the four types (*death, marginalization, assimilation* and *transformation*) in the context of Hong Kong. *Assimilation*—"when emerging practices are defined as experimental by established institutions, but their transformative potential is co-opted by existent networks of actors aiming to legitimize an established institutional order" (Savini & Bertolini, 2019)—is exemplified by pedestrianization projects promoted during phase three, such as Causeway Bay Jardine's Crescent or the Lee Tung Avenue Project. In these cases, the interaction between property investment, development groups, and policymakers shifts the pedestrianization aim from pedestrian mobility purposes to commercialism; as a result, projects are replicated without challenging the current regime. *Transformation*—"continuously and effectively challenge the existent order, remaining in permanent tension with it" (Savini & Bertolini, 2019)—is partially exemplified by the temporary pedestrianization measures implemented in older inner city street-market areas (e.g., the Temple Street Night Market or the Ladies' Market in Tung Choi Street). The pedestrianization of streets surrounding these locations provides settings for diverse street uses and users beyond large-scale, high-end commercial interests. These streets are crucial to the economy of disadvantaged neighbourhoods and are popularly recognized as part of the local culture and intangible heritage to the extent that they became a tourist attraction promoted by the Hong Kong Tourism Board (Hong Kong Tourism Board, 2023).

As this article aims to investigate the unsuccessful trajectories, cases of *assimilation* and *transformation* are not further considered for in-depth analysis, and the following sections only inquire into case studies representing *death* and *marginalization*.

3.7. The suppression of temporary pedestrianization in Sai Yeung Choi Street South

In the case of Sai Yeung Choi Street South, the social practices of buskers and performers conflicted with residents and retail tenants, required the intervention of the institutions, and led to the disappearance of the temporary pedestrian street (HKSAR Transport Department, 2018; Hui, 2018; Keegan, 2018). The temporary pedestrianization of the 400-meter street in the old commercial district of the city is aligned with phase two. The pedestrianization was initially implemented on Sundays and public holidays in August 2000 (HKSAR, 2001) and immediately created an effective measure to separate traffic from pedestrian flow (HKSAR Transport Department, 2000), prompting the traffic closure to be extended to weekdays (see Fig. 2). Initially, the time extension was welcomed by users and supported by the District Council.

Progressively, the public space made available was informally transformed into a performance stage for singers, buskers, and a large variety of street performers, followed by an audience of visitors (Yip, 2018). Without a self-regulating body or organization, individual performers were reclaiming their use of the street as a unique public space for gratuitous artistic expression in the city. Grassroots spectators and visitors from the nearby district included vulnerable social groups (e.g., older adults). With time, the number of performers and their audiences increased, contributing to a crowded physical space shared with retail customers, tourists, and visitors alike. Karaoke stalls equipped with speakers and requiring the payment of a fee to amateur performers and informal commercial sellers then started exploiting the opportunities offered by the new settings.

Soon after, conflicts emerged with residents disturbed by the noise level and retail tenants concerned that the performances would block access to the retail premises (I01). These conflicts culminated with an acid attack from the nearby buildings (HKSAR Government Secretariat, 2009). Government departments then started regulating the area (I01) by installing closed circuit cameras, and in 2010 and 2012, the temporary pedestrianization open hours were reduced. Eventually, pedestrianization was limited to weekends in 2014 (HKSAR Yau Tsim Mong District Office, 2013). Although most pedestrians (61.5 %) favored maintaining the longer implementation days, the active suppression of public uses was partially enforced (HKSAR Yau Tsim Mong District Office, 2013). However, formal complaints continued (HKSAR, 2017a). The pedestrianized street was eventually re-opened to vehicular traffic in 2018 (HKSAR Transport Department, 2018).

The closure of the Sai Yeung Choi Street South pedestrian zone is considered a failed measure and a poor example of the planning and management of pedestrian zones (I01, I03, I07). The lesson learnt from this case is expected to influence highly controlled pedestrianized space implementation programs and activities management by the local government: "If the government have a strong determination to regulate, then [Sai Yeung Choi Street] would not end up with such a situation. Regulation is important, management is important. We cannot pedestrianize without management" (I01). However, the street management limitations are also recognized by other stakeholders who question the approach and the lack of public space provision at the stage of pedestrianization planning (I03, I07, I05). Concurrently, key stakeholders remark on the failure to assess the multiple activities coexisting in the streets and on the need for more active involvement of users in planning and management through placemaking (I03, I06, I07).

3.8. The marginalization of the Chater Road temporary pedestrian zone

The case of Chater Road is representative of a pedestrian zone existing in a *permanent temporariness,* whereas the social practices occurring within the zone are in permanent tension with the institutional order. The measure is not replicated, and its transformative character is not recognized. Chater Road represents the first phase of the pedestrianization trial in Hong Kong, initiated by the retail property owners overlooking the street. The area comprises about 8000 m^2 made available as pedestrian space. When pedestrianization is in place on Sundays and public holidays, migrant domestic workers—a vulnerable group who has established its gathering place in the area since the 1980s—occupy the street (Constable, 1997) (see Fig. 2).

The social practices carried out by migrant domestic workers on Chater Road include leisure activities in groups, events and

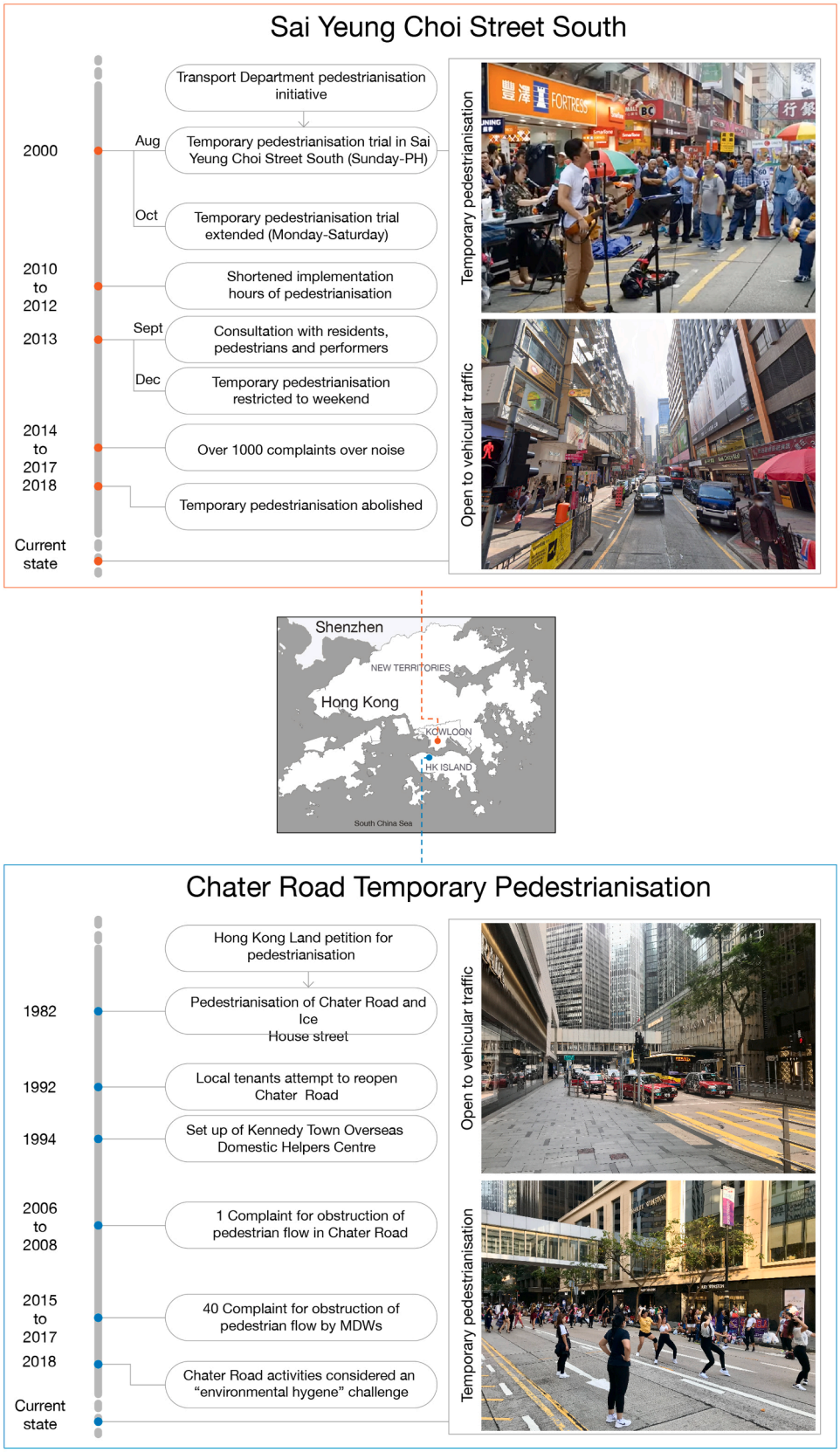

Fig. 2. Timeline of Sai Yeung Choi Street South and Chater Road pedestrianization projects.

performances organized by workers' union groups, and dance or beauty pageant organizations. Other practices, such as the informal selling of food or products, take place in stark contrast with the surrounding high-end retail stores and spaces geared toward mass consumption. The tactics of migrant domestic workers in reclaiming the pedestrianized space include creating partitions with cardboard and shading with umbrellas (Villani & Talamini, 2021), contributing to an alternative public space as a unique expression of migrant urbanism in the city.

Over the years, this temporary street reclamation was gradually controlled by governmental bodies. The same private landowners who supported pedestrianization in the 1980s petitioned for re-opening the street to traffic in the 1990s (Constable, 1997). Initially, different departments liaised to create a different gathering location for the migrant domestic workers (HKSAR Legislative Council, 2018). At the same time, until 2000, the government hawkers' control team and the police heavily patrolled the area, restraining informal sellers and preventing them from operating in the street (Henderson, 2000). The same year, during a public academic forum, the temporary street reclamation was praised as a location of unique cultural interest (idem). Officially, governmental institutions consider the Chater Road pedestrian zone to have positively met the objectives of improving the pedestrian environment and traffic circulation (HKSAR Legislative Council, 2008). However, recurring actions to control the social practices include governmental anti-pandemic control teams specifically targeting this location (HKSAR, 2020; HKSAR Leisure and Cultural Services Department, 2020).

Today the institutions so far tolerate the social practices occurring on Chater Road. Hygiene problems are reported as the primary concern in the pedestrian zone (I01). Besides, the temporary pedestrianization on Chater Road is observed to be self-regulated by migrant domestic workers with the assistance of the Philippines consulate (I01); thus, the pedestrianization is tolerated. However, similar initiatives targeting locations with a low pedestrian flow and scarce public space have not been considered elsewhere in the city (I03): the pedestrianization experiment is not replicated.

Overall, the Chater Road temporary pedestrian zone is a marginal case in the Hong Kong pedestrianization approach. The latest consultancy study (phase five) set one pilot area for pedestrianization in the Central District, where Chater Road is located. However, Chater Road was purposively omitted from the study. I03, who was involved in the study noted that areas with social practices like those occurring on Chater Road are pre-emptively excluded from consideration as pilot areas (I03).

4. Discussion

> *"Public space is the outcome of negotiation rather than the deliberate planning of trying to create a great public space. These negotiations are not the norm […]. Basically, hygiene and noise policing seem to be more the issues" (I06)*

The analysis of four decades of pedestrianization planning highlighted the limitations and barriers at the planning and implementation level concerning the promotion of active mobility *and* public uses in Hong Kong. Here, we discuss how these limitations can be relevant for implementing SE in other high-density contexts.

In environments where pedestrian mobility reaches high levels, SE should carefully seek a balance between mobility and public space use, which requires not only coordination between and across different departments at the institutional level, but also an openness to experimental approaches. However, the central role of the Transport Department circumscribed the scope of pedestrianization measures in Hong Kong to safeguard pedestrian safety in areas of high pedestrian flow (I01). The roles and responsibilities of different departments in the Hong Kong government are sharply distinguished. Recent experimental approaches tested in phase five fell short of risk aversion and lacked cooperation among departments that sought to avoid stepping on other departments' areas of competence (I03). Similarly, locations where vulnerable social groups had already established public uses of streets are excluded from pedestrianization. Risk-aversion tendency, which aims to contain the risk of failure, is observed across other urban experiments in East Asia (Zhang & Zhang, 2022) and clearly limits the radicality character of street experiments.

Urban ambitions toward reimagining streets as public spaces include participatory planning for social programs and street activities (Van-Hoose et al., 2022). In the case of Hong Kong, pedestrianization was devised as a comparatively less ambitious measure in the initial phases (phase one to phase four) but took on a broader scope in the latest phase. However, public engagement, an essential part of social programs, was primarily designed as an informative tool after major planning directions were decided (I03, I04) and, *remarkably*, as a tool to legitimize the re-opening of the Sai Yeung Choi street to traffic. In other contexts, public engagement is a means to involve the community in decision-making (Hickman & Huaylla Sallo, 2022). Our findings align with other studies in Asian cities (Tang et al., 2012), indicating that public engagement is primarily adopted in a tokenistic manner for consensus-seeking and legitimizing decisions made by government bodies (Xu & Lin, 2019; Wei, 2022). Community engagement challenges include not only difficulty involving extremely large, non-resident communities (I04) and vulnerable groups, but also intrinsic limitations in delivering public engagement through public forums (I01), a relatively outdated participatory format. A homogeneous profile of participatory workshop participants is observed in similar contexts (Chen et al., 2022).

SE also remain fragmented efforts to materialize public uses in streets and are disconnected from long-term active mobility strategies. In Hong Kong and similar high-density Asian urban environments, sustainable urban transition efforts that promote active mobility are modest (Ng, 2012). Pedestrianization post-implementation assessments primarily include evaluations of the impact on traffic-related variables rather than pedestrian mobility or an activities analysis. In the latest pedestrianization study, phase five, proposed streetscape modifications that visualize bicycles did not translate into promoting on-street cycling. Challenges include the driver's perception of car priority, the traffic right culture, and a lack of attention to pedestrians and cyclists.

The trajectories of the two cases examined in this study reveal that diverse and competing social activities can tap into spaces made available through pedestrianization. Initially, the institutional evaluation of the measure was satisfactory. However, government institutions reacted differently to public uses and social activities in the pedestrianized streets; thus, the pedestrianization trajectories differed. Street performances in Say Yeung Choi Street South encroached noise regulations, pedestrian obstruction, and hawking, all of which fall in the competence areas of specific government departments. Multiple stakeholders, such as residents and retail tenants, opposed the measure. In the case of Chater Road, recognized hygiene and noise problems were raised; however, with the district left empty during weekends, fewer stakeholders opposed emerging public uses.

The two cases influence ongoing and future pedestrian street planning and the implementation of phase five (I01, I02, I03). Informants point to the limitation in the public space implementation process (I03) and noise pollution (I02) as crucial factors in the institutional resistance toward conceptualizing pedestrianization as a public space provision. The noise pollution is further considered a concern and barrier for implementation of future measures: "One of the biggest challenges is a need to change the perception of people such that they understand that implementing a pedestrian street will not necessarily attract 'auntie dancing' and noise pollution" (I02). Consistently, residents' reservations and objections are often linked to nuisance and the disturbance of residents' daily life and environment.

The challenges highlighted are not exclusive to the case of Hong Kong. The predominance of traffic right culture and the disconnection of

SE from long-term sustainable urban mobility agendas are reported in other contexts (Verlinghieri et al., 2023). Similarly, the challenges inherent in the interdepartmental collaboration necessary for public space creation are observed (Glaser & Krizek, 2021). When SE (e.g., Open Streets) attract public activities, unintended impacts may include noise pollution (Benavides et al., 2023). Nevertheless, resistance to the implementation of pedestrianization measures differs. In European cities, residents are wary that, due to increased economic impacts and more attractive urban spaces, these measures may lead to gentrification, the exclusion of vulnerable groups from the areas (Kębłowski et al., 2019; VanHoose et al., 2022). In the case of high-density Asian cities, pedestrianized space is often reclaimed by vulnerable groups (Ostertag, 2016; Villani & Talamini, 2021).

Eventually, unlike in Europe, all land in Hong Kong is state property, and land premiums are a major source of government revenue. Government-driven public space commodification in this context aims to induce gentrification and increase the monetary gain (Chan, 2023). Subsequently, the appropriation of pedestrianized streets by marginalized social groups may, arguably, not be positively seen from the government's standpoint as such appropriation can be detrimental to price uplift in nearby areas (Murakami et al., 2021). Thus, the experiments *assimilated* and replicated in other urban areas tend to be connected to the commodification of public space and urban redevelopment.

5. Conclusion

SE are increasingly adopted as an urban paradigm to change urban mobility and liveability challenges. This paper examined the case of Hong Kong, an area with a less explored geographical scope from previous scholarship. To do so, we reviewed four decades of pedestrianization planning—examining the actors, purposes, and implementation criteria—with a topical focus on highlighting the contribution to the domain of active mobility and public space provision. Findings indicate that, historically (phase one to phase four), pedestrianization has been adopted for pedestrian safety without significant disruption to traffic flow while exhibiting very modest transformative intentions toward promoting sustainable active mobilities or public space creation. Recent consultancy studies advancing experimental approaches are still influenced by barriers such as risk aversion and safety, government, and structural hindrances to effective public engagement. Risk aversion is observed in other similar contexts and raises questions about the extent of the experimental characters of SE. Drawing from Savini and Bertolini's (2019) theoretical proposition, we identified four SE development pathway cases and traced the existence *trajectories* for two extreme cases representing suppression and marginalization of the pedestrianization measure. Tensions between social practices and institutional order—given the intrinsic conflict of interests—were met by active suppression and remained prevalent in the active pedestrian zone.

Current waves of urban experiments are expanding to Asian high-density cities as measures to tackle the socio-environmental challenges facing these urban environments. This study calls for careful analysis addressing the planning and political environments in which experiments are introduced. Without reducing the challenges raised by the implementation of SE to issues of street management, consideration in future planning and assessment should be given to the selection of SE locations, the emerging social activities, and uses of streets. In any case, the social needs of the public should supersede the governmental monetary interests in land premiums. In Asia, where high density is exacerbating stakeholder conflicts over limited street resources, SE must have the support of civil society and the promotion of the private sector and dedicated institutions (with sufficient resources to ensure the proper implementation and management of policies and projects) to succeed. Moreover, SE's prosperity is bound to a double paradigm shift: the focus must move from purely technical to the political empowerment of civil society, and an ontological turn is necessary from a statutory plan-making process to strategically plan for non-hierarchical, flexible, pragmatic, experimental, and discretionary systems.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Caterina Villani: Conceptualization, Methodology, Data curation, Visualization, Investigation, Validation, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Gianni Talamini:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of Competing Interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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