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From God's home to people's house: Property struggles of church redevelopment

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Abstract

Religious organizations participate in urban redevelopment in various ways including redeveloping their churches. While the literature has attempted to explain church redevelopment from different perspectives, what has often been forgotten is the fundamental characteristic of churches as property in cities. Drawing on the established scholarship of legal geography, this article argues that the lens of property relations offers an insightful framework to examine church redevelopment. By presenting a case study in Hong Kong, this article unpacks the property struggles of church redevelopment to examine how that resulted from the conflicting property claims and why these claims emerged. This article contrasts and analyzes the religious and market-driven values underlying these claims in the context of a property-led society like Hong Kong. To understand how urban churches transform from God's home to people's house, it is necessary to recognize the diverse readings of property. In so doing, this article invites scholars to re-conceptualize urban struggles from the property lens.

Keywords:

Church redevelopment, Property, Legal geography, Hong Kong

1. Introduction

'A church is a home, which should be differentiated from a house. House can be sold or rented. Home is a composite of love.'

- Cardinal John Wu, 10 November 2001, in the opening ceremony of the redeveloped Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church.

Cardinal Wu, the former Bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong, diligently highlights the conflicting values underlying church redevelopment in a property-led society. Hong Kong has witnessed the property boom and massive urban redevelopment since the 1980s. Redevelopment in cities like Hong Kong is often depicted as 'the demolition of individual residential high-rise towers in central districts to be replaced by more lucrative commercial or residential buildings' (Lees et al., 2016, p. 171), which attracted scholarly interests on redevelopment of residential (Ip, 2018, La Grange and Pretorius, 2016, Ley and Teo, 2014, Ye et al., 2015) and industrial and commercial buildings (Chan et al., 2015, Lai, 2016, Ren et al., 2014, Wadu Mesthrige et al., 2018). What has been left unexplored is the redevelopment of sacred spaces. Church sites with unrestricted leases¹ have high redevelopment potentials, and they are often acquired by property tycoons and turned into 'cash cows' for property development (Lee and Tang, 2017, p. 3413). Church redevelopment invokes social controversies over historical values amidst the growing public awareness of heritage conservation (Barber, 2014, Chung, 2011). In a property-led society with a high-density urban landscape like Hong Kong, it is in the spotlight because religious buildings, most notably that of Christianity and Chinese traditional beliefs, create a spatio-religious hybridity that 'kept religion resurgent in the relentless commercial urbanscape' (Goh, 2016, p. 447), and they are intended for worshipping, serving the spiritual needs and creating a sense of religious belonging (Westendorp, 2017), keeping a distance from the citywide concern about real estate hegemony (Lee and Tang, 2017).

The redevelopment of Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church (OLMC) in Wan Chai reflects some tensions and struggles in church redevelopment. Despite the parishioners' struggles against the redevelopment in the 1990s, the Diocese sold and jointly redeveloped this church site with Cheung

¹ Hong Kong exercises a leasehold land system. Historically, some land lots in the old urban area were leased under the conditions which did not restrict their land uses. The landholder, thus, is not required to pay a land premium for modifying the lease to change land uses (Nissim, 2016). Many historical church sites share this characteristic, while the more recent religious sites are often held under private treaty grants. For the latter, market transactions of land property are usually forbidden.

Kong (CK), a leading local developer in Hong Kong. A 42-storey residential property named 'No. 1 Star Street' was built, accommodating a new church on its lowest two storeys. The Diocese defended this redevelopment as an inevitable consequence simply due to the deterioration of the building and the transformations of a secularizing society, similar to other cases of its kind. Although the recent wave of church redevelopment in Hong Kong is described by Bloomberg News as 'similar to what happened in New York' (Yun and Mao, 2014), it is under-researched. To fill this gap, this article considers church redevelopment as property struggles. Religious organizations increasingly participate in urban redevelopment to transform places of worship into saleable or rentable residential and commercial buildings, which is conceptualized as secularization in the existing literature. This article seeks to push relevant research forward, by drawing on the scholarship of legal geography, to argue that the lens of property relations can tell a more complicated story of transforming God's home into people's house.

This article links up the geographies of religion and law which offer opportunities for exploring the nexus of urban and religion. The lens of property relations can associate more, as what Kong (1993) had proposed, the religious realm with the sociopolitical and economic forces. Firstly, in the geography of religion, churches are often characterized as officially sacred spaces in cities (Holloway, 2003, Kong, 2010, Kong, 2001). Geographers have already dedicated much work to understand the making and production of sacred space in both traditional, formal and official setting (della Dora, 2018) as well as non-traditional, unofficial and precarious setting (Dafydd Jones, 2018, Finlayson, 2017, Kong, 2002). Church redevelopment is particularly relevant to advancing these understandings of sacred space because both spatial settings can be observed during the whole process. Church redevelopment begins with demolishing the official church building, then church services for the believers have to take place in unofficial and contingent sacred space on certain temporary arrangements until the new church is built, and after which the religious communities need to remake the official sacred space. The church redevelopment process, especially the transformation of sacred space, is worth documenting and analyzing.

Secondly, legal geographers suggest church properties are complex sets of socio-spatial relations (Blomley, 2005, Braverman et al., 2014, Staeheli and Mitchell, 2008). Property, as Nicholas Blomley (2010, p. 354) notes, is 'an enforceable claim of a person to some use or benefit of something', entailing the right to exclude others which can also be developed as the right to not be excluded (Blomley, 2016). As a part of urban built environment, either traditional or non-traditional church must deal with the realm of property. While the politics and the poetics of church as a

sacred space are studied in religious geography, its politics of property and exclusion should be explored further. Sacred space can be meaningful and powerful because of being ‘appropriated, possessed and owned’, as religious scholars Chidester and Linenthal (1995, p. 8) write, so different claims on property rights assert and maintain the sacred character of a place but might keep certain people excluded from it.

This article, therefore, brings together the two strands of geographical scholarship to scrutinize church redevelopment as property struggles. Property struggle is a socio-spatial process during which different actors engage in difficult attempts to advance diverse and conflicting interests on the property so as to appropriate the space as they wish. We argue that property struggles express the contested claims emerged from different readings of property that are characterized by different logics and values. For church redevelopment, when spiritual needs confront with market-driven logic of profit maximization, the conflicting property claims result in property struggles. These discussions are built upon the investigation of OLMC. In the religiously diverse society of Hong Kong, Catholicism is peculiarly distinguished from its Christian counterparts for its universal aspect and the established, institutionalized and centralized hierarchy (Westendorp, 2017). It has been working closely with the government to provide social services since the making of the colony. This case highlights the struggles with the authority and the politics of precarious sacred spaces (Dafydd Jones, 2018), and also reflects the contested readings of property in land along with its history and spatial practices. OLMC was the only plot of Catholic church land came from land transactions, which was purchased by a parishioner, though the landholder printed on the land lease was the Catholic Diocese.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature to examine how church redevelopment is understood within the secularization debates and to highlight its potential for further exploration. Then, Section 3 introduces the property lens in legal geography and argues it can enrich the explanation of church redevelopment. Section 4 outlines the case study methodology and sets the scene. Through the property lens, Section 5 documents and analyzes the OLMC case, while Section 6 unpacks the property struggles. To reflect upon the hegemonic redevelopment in cities, Section 7 concludes with the idea that property relations are central to understand urban struggles and discusses the implications of this article.

2. Church redevelopment and the complexities of secularization

In the literature of geographies of religion, there are debates on how secularization leads to church redevelopment, including the (de-)/(re-)making of sacred spaces, the marketisation of religion, the socio-spatial process resulted from diminishing role of the church in secularizing societies, the declining church membership, and the abandoned church buildings (Cimino, 2011, Hackworth and Gullikson, 2013, Lynch, 2016, Martin and Ballamingie, 2016, Mian, 2008, Payne and Greiner, 2019, Velthuis and Spennemann, 2007). These works offer numerous insights for us to explore further. Researchers observed that religious organizations are actively involved in urban redevelopment in various ways, such as rebuilding their places of worship, selling their properties to finance charity services, and partnering with property developers for redevelopment. Albeit adaptive reuse of church buildings as an alternative to redevelopment is observed (Lynch, 2016, Martin and Ballamingie, 2016, Payne and Greiner, 2019), a large proportion of religious organizations tends to suggest demolition of redundant churches as the best option because churches should not be reused in ways other than offering religious services (Velthuis and Spennemann, 2007). Mian (2008) shows both churches and developers in a partnership can gain benefits, thus resulting in a ‘win-win’ situation. Complete demolition of these deteriorated church buildings, replaced by new non-religious buildings, is understood as complete secularization (Hackworth and Gullikson, 2013). These redevelopment cases are mostly accounted for the rise of abandoned churches and the decline in church membership which represent secularization that is generally considered as the decline of religion (Cox, 1990, Kong, 2010, Taylor, 2007).

Recent debates on secularization have produced new insights by refreshing the ideas between the sacred and the secular aspects of human societies. Scholars developed new concepts such as ‘the postsecular’ to shift the focus of debates away from the secular concern. This postsecular turn rediscovers that the religiosity and the sacred are re-engaged and re-emerged in urban social life (Kong, 2010), and shows religious actors, symbolism and ideologies remain their historically developed influence on decision-makings in modern urban governance (Eade, 2011, Gao and Qian, 2019, Qian and Kong, 2018a). Other terms like ‘grounded theologies’ (Tse, 2014) and ‘infrasecular’ (della Dora, 2018) emerged to argue further that the complexities of the societies have to be captured by recognizing ‘the secular and the religious coexist, overlap and compete’ (della Dora, 2018, p. 48). Empirical case studies echoed these theoretical advancements that a dichotomous approach cannot sufficiently explain the hybridity of these

logics and values. As exemplified by the notions of entrepreneurial religion (Qian and Kong, 2018b) and religious urbanism (Woods, 2019), religious groups respond to urban changes and acquire spaces in an increasingly transgressive way, which are influenced by market forces of commercialization and competition. To gain access to resources for maintaining religious buildings and providing religious-based services in the urban space, churches need to adapt to the inter-faith competition and become entrepreneurial (Giorda and Vanolo, 2019).

These overlapping and contesting religious, sacred and secular, profane logics and values are identified in sacred spaces. Following this line of thought, attempts have been made to explore both officially and unofficially sacred spaces (Dafydd Jones, 2018, Dunn, 2001, Eade, 2011, Finlayson, 2017, Kong, 2002, Slyomovics, 1996). As Kong (2002, p. 1584) writes, church 'is not distinctively a sacred or secular place, but a hybrid place that is simultaneously sacred and secular'. This can be revealed in church redevelopment which brings changes to the religious landscapes of cities. These geographical changes, as della Dora (2018, p. 45) argues, 'are shaped and sustained through continuous [physical] unmaking and remaking' of the places of worship as much as their making. Finlayson (2017, p. 320) concludes that the sacralization of a space is facilitated through the church member's 'collective, spiritual and emotional engagement with the space'. Azzara (2019) argues the congregants' practices of engaging in a precarious and makeshift worship space shape their sense of place. This article suggests that these worshippers' engagement with the space can be explored in cases of church redevelopment to recognize how it influences the material transformation of the religious landscape during the unmaking and remaking of sacred spaces. What the existing literature can also offer to the analyses of church redevelopment is the precarious nature of sacred space which is contingent to the users' engagement with, as well as the authority over the rights to, the space (Dafydd Jones, 2018).

In sum, the existing literature reveals the co-existence, contestations and competitions between secular and religious logics and values. These are reflected in the complexities and materialities of sacred spaces such as churches. Qian and Kong (2018b) analyzed the secular-religious interface to show the religious organizations in modern cities may actively appropriate secular rationalities, values and logics, playing a proactive approach to market changes. These secular ideologies influence the makings of decisions and judgements. Religious logic emphasizes the faith and sacred aspirations, often invoking the importance of the rituals and customs of religions for the spiritual benefits to the life of human beings which are hardly measured. In comparison with religious logic, secular logic pays more attention to the material aspect which rationalize the

decision-makings, and it must be understood in the contemporary capitalist mode of urbanization in human history (Eade, 2011) because secular logic tempts the church to become market-driven in development (Chong, 2015). It is argued that these diverse logics motivate how one experiences, perceives and comprehends the property. Conflicting readings of property lead to different extent of property struggles. Given these entanglements, it is worthwhile to scrutinize ideas of how churches as property relations are at work.

3. Through the lens of property relations

The property lens provides an entry point to examine how different people make their claims and how property struggles emerge in the redevelopment process.

Previous studies have put forward labels such as ‘property tycoon hegemony’ (Poon, 2005), ‘culture of property’ (Ley and Teo, 2014) and ‘property mind’ (Haila, 2017) to draw attention to the peculiar characteristics of property development in Hong Kong and the power relations between different actors, which is ‘too often ignored but today increasingly important’ (Haila, 2017, p. 507). Tang (2017), among others, proposes the concept of ‘hegemonic-cum-alienated redevelopment’ to emphasize the land and property relations as the primary source of contradiction in the systematic reproduction and associated power politics of urban redevelopment in Hong Kong. Underlying the heated property development in Hong Kong is the ‘ownership model’ which is hegemonic that shapes how we understand property, presuming that property is exchanged for economic growth and wealth accumulation subject to its ownership (Blomley, 2003). This view of identifying property as a commodity in the market stresses its alienability and overlooks the community and social values in place (Page, 2019). For this reason, some of the analyses of social justice and property rights are trapped in this model (e.g. Lai et al., 2018), and thinking about property in a broader relational term can enrich them.

Legal geographers challenge this conventional thinking of property by conceptualizing property as a complex set of socio-spatial relations. Property is essentially contested, entailing conflicting relations among social actors. Maandi’s “landscape of property” (2009) shows the complexity of property relations by highlighting that the statutory law, spatial structure of properties, local behavior of communities and the material landscape altogether constitute the propertied landscape. Landownership and property rights are articulated differently and thus result in a set of conflicting property relations expressed in both material and intangible structures. This conception of property has significant

linkages with the place of community in which collective identities might be shared (Page, 2019). Particularly, the local behavior is of utmost importance because it manifests the contested property claims which respectively express how different social actors think about their rights and entitlements to the property confrontationally, though not all the claims are formally acknowledged and mutually recognized (Bruun et al., 2017). The domination of the private value of property in terms of exclusion and commodity tends to prevent the diverse values of property from being emphasized (Blomley, 2016, Page, 2019).

This article attempts to unpack the property struggle observed in the OLMC redevelopment case. It analyzes how the conflicting property claims emerge from the contradictions of logics driven by religion and market. While property is ‘the focus of struggles at all levels of social organisation, within and between families, communities, classes and states’ (von Benda-Beckmann et al., 2009, p. 2), the ways how people struggle over the appropriation and re-appropriation of urban space constitute the urban politics (Brenner et al., 2011, Jayne and Ward, 2017, Marcuse, 2009). Through examining the property struggles, we can better understand the politics of the urban redevelopment, and it is necessary to identify and analyze the underlying property claims for such a purpose. Property claims, asserting socially constructed values, are mostly involved in the struggles among individuals or collective about the meaning of property rights (Underkuffler, 2003). Conflicts against any urban redevelopment depend on how the concerned parties read the property differently and contradictorily within the wider power relations of the city. Struggles over space will occur when the powerless and the affected have decided to claim their property rights for re-appropriating the space (Blandy and Wang, 2013, Blomley, 2014, Ilbery et al., 2010).

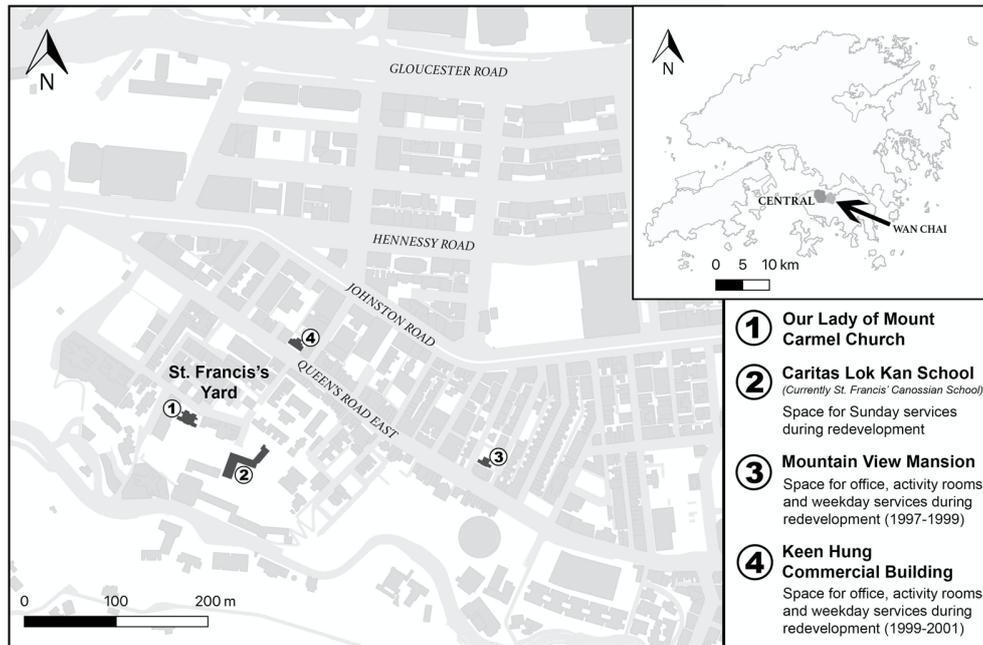
Church is often characterized as sacred space in cities, but it is fundamentally a property. It is distinguishable from other properties mainly because church is functionally used in a different way which has a spiritual quality as people practice religious rituals (Dafydd Jones, 2018), and church politically maintains the social order and governance of the contemporary urban society (Garmany, 2010, Kong, 1993). However, our everyday experiences seldom alert us that church is a private property. In her exploration of the relationship between religious space and religious practice in Hong Kong, Westendorp (2016) identified how urban density influences religious space in the built environment. Christian churches are less visually prominent because they are accommodated within buildings. This kind of house churches is also observed in Singapore (Kong, 2002). In contrast, many Catholic churches in Hong Kong are stand-alone structures which is highly visible in the urban landscape. Nonetheless, property relations are often overlooked in the eyes of the non-owner

individuals, because they are understood as an exclusive relation between an object and its owner, even though other social actors can also have certain connections and bundles of rights to the property. Church as religious space is significant to the local Catholic worshippers because it represents the worshippers' personal relationship with God and is 'a network where people can meet each other and be part of the larger universal Catholic Church' (Westendorp, 2017, p. 127). As an urban space of everyday encounters, the sacred space is open for everyone to participate in the collective religious rituals rather than being an individualized dominium. As Dafydd Jones (2018) outlines, both the practices of rituals, which essentially characterize the sacred, and the material construction of the spaces are equally important.

We bring this insight further to argue that church in Hong Kong is an ordinary property, but sacrality makes it extraordinary through the practices of rituals and faith (Dafydd Jones, 2018, Kong, 2001). With this understanding, it is important to explore how the property relations of church are intertwined with the religious relations of the church members. This exploration requires us to ask about the intersection between the church property and the authority who uses, manages and defines it. It demands an analysis which can capture the power relations within the hierarchical structure of the Church. Relatedly, this inquiry addresses how law authoritatively orders the sacred space, and in which some aspects that worshippers and other users considered important might have been downplayed. In sum, this article unravels the spatial dynamics of the church as a property beyond a mere sacred space.

4. Setting the scene: Studying OLMC in Wan Chai

OLMC is located in Wan Chai (Map 1). As led by the economic restructuring of Hong Kong in the 1980s, Wan Chai has transformed from a poor inner-city neighborhood to an extended part of the central business district (Ip, 2019). Unlike North American cities, the role of central business district in Hong Kong has never declined amidst the economic transformation over the past decades (Lui, 2017). This urban centrality has only increased as a result of the urban redevelopment activities in face of an 'intensified valorization of space around the city center to meet the demand for office space and expensive apartments for the professionals and managers working in the growing finance and business services sectors', as Lui (2017, p. 485) argued.



Map 1. Locations of OLMC and temporary worship places during the redevelopment.

Religious organizations are key players of the redevelopment projects in Wan Chai. Although this wave of redevelopment appears similar to other cities, it is not difficult to find that most of these church properties were not redundant or abandoned before demolition. They were in relatively good conditions. Vibrant and active church communities were still found in these properties. Salient decline of religious beliefs was not observed. In addition, the participation of property developers in church redevelopment was proactive. These sites were usually redeveloped into residential/commercial complexes with the provision of offices and places of worship for the religious organizations. The former British Methodist church built in 1936, for example, was demolished in the late 1980s and redeveloped into a hotel named 'OZO Wesley'. The United Methodist Church, demolished in 1994 after serving for almost sixty years, is accommodated in 'Methodist House', a commercial complex redeveloped by the Church and New World Development. Before redevelopment, OLMC as a Catholic church, comprises places of worship, a primary school and some faith-based organizations serving the youth and the foreign domestic workers. These churches were located there because during the early years of British colonialization, Wan Chai was the eastern periphery district in the Victoria City where the less-privileged people inhabited, so many Christian missionaries serving the people there with various social services. Catholicism became one of the six broadly recognized major religions² in Hong Kong. In contrast with the self-funded

² Although Catholicism constitutes Christianity, Protestantism is another distinct category of major religions in the society of Hong Kong.

and self-governed Protestant churches, Catholic Church's religious, educational and social services are all under the direction of the bishop who is the central and only authority overseeing the Diocese's development, finance and personnel issues³.

Being the first Catholic church serving the Chinese people, OLMC dates back to the 1840s when the Catholic Church formed St. Francis's Yard with a chapel and some houses as an urban Catholic community by acquiring land properties through land transactions or private treaty land grants from the government (Ha, 2018). The first power plant of the city was built in the Yard in 1888, which was then closed down in 1922 due to relocation. Meanwhile, the Church redeveloped the Yard's chapel into a residential building for liquidation to construct a large church in another district. The services for the growing group of worshippers had to take place in other places within the district on a temporary basis, which can be understood as what Dafydd Jones (2018) termed, precarious sacred spaces. This community expressed their desire for a church in forms of regular prayer since 1934 which can be secularly regarded as an appeal to the bishop who eventually promised to establish a parish for them in 1936. The electricity company agreed to sell the former power plant land in Star Street to the Church, but the Church was unable to finance the payment. In 1939, Mr. Wong, a member of the worshippers in the Yard who was virtually the only rich from his business with the British, paid the land price and never asked the Church for paying back. After the Second World War, the worshippers collected money among themselves and from fundraising to cover more than half of the construction cost, while the Catholic Diocese funded the balance (Yip and Tang, 2017). The church building, including a primary school, was completed in 1950. Although the worshipper de facto purchased the land, the landholder printed on the land lease was the Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong. This was the only plot of Catholic church land came from land transaction. It was held under unrestricted lease which offered beneficial conditions for redevelopment (Interview 12). In terms of land use zoning, the land was a G/IC⁴ zone until its amendment to residential zoning in 2010 to reflect its redevelopment.

In addition to its location and historicity, OLMC is chosen as a case study because there exists a wide range of materials and informants which helps scrutinize the property struggles involved and epitomize urban

³ The statistics compiled by the Diocese in 2018 reveals that the region with 8 million residents has a Catholic population of 399,000 people and 52 parishes (including 100 churches and chapels).

⁴ According to the Wan Chai Outline Zoning Plan, the site was zoned as "Government, Institution or Community" (G/IC).

redevelopments in Hong Kong. As Geva and Rosen (2018) suggest, the literature, focusing on the roles of government and developers in the urban redevelopment process, should pay more attention to the affected communities and, particularly, how they deal with the developers. The researchers began this study by conducting some informal discussions with the parish worshippers, priests and the Diocese officials. Because of their own experience, the researchers are familiar with the beliefs and the practices of the Catholic faith, and the administrative operations of the Catholic Diocese, enabling them to get access to the valuable sources of information. The researchers are aware of the reflexivity about this research process, so data from different sources are triangulated to avoid bias. This case study is based on the methods of textual analysis and interviews. The researchers visited the Hong Kong Catholic Diocese Archives and the office of Kung Kao Po⁵ (KKP) for data collection to construct an account of the redevelopment process. This account is, then, verified by the government official data, namely the land registration record at the Land Registry, the outline zoning plans and relevant planning documents, and historical documents at the Hong Kong Government Records Service. The archival materials used in the textual analysis include letters, meeting minutes, memorandum, sketches, plans, photos and statistical reports. To further validate the account and learn about how different parties struggle in the appropriation and re-appropriation of space, a total of twelve in-depth, semi-structured interviews⁶ with people involved and concerned in the church redevelopment process were conducted from 2016 to 2017 (Table 1). The interviewees were asked to describe their experience and reflections on the negotiation and redevelopment processes. They were also asked about their memories and claims about this church property, allowing us to explore why and how different property claims were voiced.

⁵ The Catholic Diocesan weekly newspaper.

⁶ Interviews were conducted in Cantonese, with one exception in English. This article presents the translated quotations.

Table 1. Summary of interviews.

Code	Interviewee Capacity
01	Parishioner Alumnus of Ki Lap Day School
02	Former employee who worked at one of the offices at OLMC
03	Member of a Diocesan Committee Member of redevelopment task force
04	Former employee who worked at one of the offices at OLMC
05	Parishioner Parish Council Member during redevelopment Member of redevelopment task force
06	Parishioner Former employee of Ki Lap Day School
07	Parishioner Relative of Mr Wong who <i>de facto</i> purchased the land
08	Parishioner Parish Council Member during redevelopment
09	Former employee of Diocese
10	Priest who worked at OLMC
11	Priest Member of redevelopment task force
12	Priest Former senior executive officer in the Diocese Former member of the Board of Diocesan Consultors

5. Property struggles in the redevelopment: A home replaced by a house

The existing narratives consider the redevelopment of OLMC as a solution to the underutilized space of displaced worshippers and school closure, as well as the increasing maintenance cost of the deteriorating building. Fukushima and Doi (2013) claimed that the redevelopment was proposed in 1996 because the school became vacant after its closure in 1994. KKP (21 February 1997) also presented a similar account that the Diocese, immediately after the school closure, met with the parish in June 1994. The Diocese proposed to discontinue OLMC and suggested that the parishioners in Wan Chai can go to other nearby churches as alternatives. These accounts suggest the Diocese's decision of demolishing the church was an inevitable outcome following the school closure. However, our

empirical findings inform us that liquidation was the main reason why the Diocese decided to close the school and the church.

5.1. The rationale of redevelopment

Many parishioners and residents in St. Francis's Yard were displaced in the 1970s because of urban redevelopment. The pre-war three-storey buildings with high redevelopment potentials attracted developers. Urban transformation of St. Francis's Yard resulted in the demise of a Catholic urban community. Although there was a decline in the number of teachers and students, the school was praised as the most successful case among the Catholic schools which had adopted the activity-education approach (KKP, 12 August 1994; KKP, 2 September 1994). The property also functioned as a community center as there was inadequate open space in the high-density neighborhood of Wan Chai (Interview 01). The government district office also sponsored the church to organize community activities in the 1980s⁷. Some faith-based organizations, such as Hong Kong Catholic Youth Council⁸, were also accommodated in the building (Interview 02).

In May 1993, the Episcopal Delegate for Education in the Diocese, accompanied by the school principal and the parish priest, announced to the teachers that the school would be closed in a year (Interview 06) because the low student enrolment could not offer a dynamic learning environment for students (KKP, 2 September 1994). Coincidentally, the duty of the parish priest of OLMC⁹ was suspended in July 1993 and he was assigned to another position in 1994. Another priest was appointed as the parish priest of OLMC, school supervisor and the Youth Council chaplain (Interviews 02 and 04). Although the Diocese emphasized the decision of school closure was merely based on educational consideration, it was unlikely the reality. When the two priests discussed the handover matters, the former priest mentioned to his successor that the church 'would most probably be demolished and there was a plan of redevelopment' (Interview 10). This suggests that the Diocese proposed the redevelopment plan before closing the school.

Besides, portraying the building as a deteriorating structure rationalized the redevelopment decision which was made by the Board of Diocesan Consultors, the highest body in the Diocesan hierarchy. A senior manager

⁷ 25th November 1981 – 3rd December 1985, 'Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church', HKRS852-1-67, Hong Kong Government Records Service.

⁸ Hong Kong Catholic Youth Council moved into the church property in the late 1980s. This is a territory-wide organization, beyond the Diocesan hierarchy, to advocate for student social movements.

⁹ He was also the chaplain of the aforementioned Youth Council since the 1980s.

in the Diocese (Interview 12) commented that ‘it was a building of the 1950s, the school was a private school, the government would not subsidize - how can we maintain the building?’ He described this was a question of reality, requiring ways to utilize the space. However, a professional engineer in a Diocesan commission on land acquisition, planning and building¹⁰ revealed another tale. This engineer firmly and definitely pointed out that the building was not in deterioration and there was no structural problem leading to the necessity of redevelopment. He further emphasized that the main objective of redeveloping the church was ‘liquidation, because the Diocese needed money to build new churches in new towns’ (Interview 03). A priest who worked in the parish also described that the condition of the church building was fair despite the fact that the building looked obsolete, and it was still functional (Interview 10).

These reveal the real rationale of the redevelopment decision was liquidation. Hong Kong government started to build new towns outside the main urban areas in the 1980s such as Tin Shui Wai, Tung Chung, Tsing Yi and Tseung Kwan O. Due to the expanded territory, the Church had to consider how to shepherd the religious needs of worshippers in these newly developed areas. New church buildings were required in these new towns. Although the land plots were allocated by the government under private treaty grant, the Diocese needed to cover the construction cost. Therefore, the Board of Diocesan Consultors considered selling and redeveloping OLMC as the most realistic and practical option for liquidation, because the land was held under the unrestricted lease which allows transactions in the property market (Interviews 03 and 12).

5.2. In search of joint venture with a developer

This redevelopment project, till now, is the only Catholic Church’s redevelopment project involving places of worship that is implemented by joint venture with property developer in Hong Kong (Interview 12). Having considered the resistance from the parishioners who strongly opposed the proposal of parish closure, the Board of Diocesan Consultors decided not to merge OLMC with the nearby parishes, but still decided, in principle, to implement this redevelopment project (KKP, 21 February 1997). The Diocesan Procurator, then, approached and invited a few property developers to submit tender under confidential offer. The Procurator consequently chose CK which had offered the most beneficial

¹⁰ This commission was formed, on the one hand, the Church estimated that some new churches in new towns will be built, and, on the other hand, there was a need to maintain and repair the old church buildings constructed since the 1950s (KKP, 1 March 1996).

terms and recommended it to the Board of Diocesan Consultors (Interview 03).

The Catholic Diocese was experienced in collaborating with CK. The Catholic Church has been owning properties and involving in land and property speculation in Hong Kong (Ha, 2018). In the late-twentieth century, when the property market was booming, the Catholic Diocese sold some land properties (which were not churches) to property developers. A vacant seminary was redeveloped into Pokfulam Gardens in the 1970s, providing more than one thousand private residential apartments. A pre-war residential building in Central, located next to the Catholic Cathedral, was also converted into a high-rise residential building named Robinson Gardens in the 1980s. CK was the developer of these property development projects. With these joint-venture experiences, the Diocese eventually learnt how to deal and cooperate with developers (Interview 12).

During their negotiation, the Diocese requested CK to reserve the first floor and half of the ground floor of the new building for accommodating the church. The revenue earned from the residential property was to be shared by both parties in a certain, yet confidential, proportion (Interviews 03 and 12). Our interviewee refused to disclose the actual terms of the joint venture as 'this was our negotiations with the developer... these were their business conditions which they tended not to reveal' (Interview 12). That said, Fukushima and Doi's research (2013) reveals that CK was responsible for the building design, construction cost and sales of flats, while the Diocese handled the church design and its interior furnishing cost.

The site was a G/IC land which meant a planning permission was required from the Town Planning Board (TPB) to redevelop it into residential use. CK was responsible for dealing with TPB so that the Diocese 'did not need to be annoyed by these town planning procedures' (Interview 12). Once the documents were ready, the Diocese as the landholder submitted the planning application for the proposed 'Residential Cum G/IC (Church) Development' to the TPB (Interview 03). Having the church component in the application, it was considered as an advantage to persuade and obtain TPB approval because the redeveloped property shall continue providing religious and community services for public interest (Interview 12). On 18 October 1996, TPB approved this planning application (A/H5/254).

The joint venture (including the planning application process) underwent confidentially. Only the senior executive members of the Diocese and CK were involved in the discussion. The worshippers in the parish had no idea of what happened until the planning approval was reported in the

newspaper on 19 October 1996. As the site was held under an unrestricted lease, the developer was not required to pay any land premium. To any developers, this was of utmost importance because the project cost can be substantially reduced.

5.3. Conflicting property claims by the worshippers, the Diocese and the developer

As time proceeds, the property struggle was twofold. First, the neighborhood concern of the parish conflicted with the territorial concern of the Diocese at different spatial scales. This confrontation was finally settled as the Diocese exercised its absolute controlling power. Second, the Diocese resolved the conflict with the developer's profit-making objective by compromising certain principles in religious missions.

5.3.1. *Conflict between the parish and the Diocese*

Since the parish was not informed anything about the redevelopment project after meeting with the Diocese in 1994, the whole parish was shocked by the news article on Ming Pao dated 19 October 1996. The news also shocked the parish priest. A former staff of Youth Council said that 'I clearly remembered it was a Saturday morning. The priest came to my office, holding a Ming Pao saying that "our church was going to be demolished". He was really shocked. I was surprised that even the parish priest had no idea about the latest information of the redevelopment. I also clearly remembered that it was reported in the section of economic or real estate.' (Interview 04). The parishioners and parish priest understood that the redevelopment might happen, but they expected to be, at least, informed before the news report (Interview 10). The Diocese did not approach the parish until a parishioner wrote to KKP, printed on 14 February 1997, to express his disappointment. Coincidentally, the parish priest was dismissed from his duty in February 1997.

This letter to the editor invoked a meeting among the parish priest, parishioners and the Diocesan representative (KKP, 21 February 1997). The news headlines were 'lack of communication' and 'disagreement still exists'. The Diocese announced the church building would be demolished before summer. The parishioner and the priest criticized that the parish was not adequately consulted, and the Diocese did not consider the parishioners' sense of belonging. They also doubted that the place of worship and activity spaces after redevelopment would be insufficient. The Diocesan representative responded that he hoped the parishioners could understand the need of the Diocese. The Diocese and the parish decided to meet again to settle the controversies, and the Diocese would send people at higher positions as representatives to discuss with the parish.

Whilst the next meeting in March was reported as ‘good communication can facilitate successful redevelopment’ (KKP, 7 March 1997), an attendee felt it was a ‘showdown’ as a senior Diocesan representative thumped the table and criticized the parishioners for not being considerate (Interview 05). As the Diocese was legally the landholder, and the redevelopment decision had been made, the parishioners indeed understood it was impossible to turn down that displeasing decision (Interview 05). The parishioners only wished their voices can be considered in the redevelopment process and had two major concerns about the redevelopment: demand for space and sense of place.

Before the meeting, the parishioners collected relevant information to prove their need for adequate space for pastoral work. During this meeting, the Diocese representatives used census data to illustrate that Wan Chai had been transforming from a mere residential district into a commercial-cum-residential district. Given the declining and aging population, the size of the church can be reduced to a capacity of 200 seats. The parish representatives disagreed with the Diocese’s proposal and insisted that a hall and activity rooms should also be provided for organizing seminars and gatherings which were essential for the pastoral work of the parish.

In addition to the need for space, the parish representatives were aware of the sense of place. As we have illustrated, the land acquisition and the building construction were greatly contributed by the parish in the past, and the St. Francis’s Yard was inhabited by the people there, so the parishioners have developed a strong and collective sense of place which supported their property claim. A parish representative reminded the Diocesan representatives of the parish history, and the senior Diocesan representative simply put that ‘this is a property of the Diocese’ (Interview 08). This formal and legal reading of ownership relation had determined how the Diocese developed their powerful property claim which dominated the whole confrontation. One of the Diocesan representatives also criticized that it was unfair to accuse the Diocese for not consulting the parish, because many uncertainties made the Diocese hard to consult the parish. In our interview, a Diocesan representative agreed that the Diocese must respect the developer by keeping things confidential during the commercial negotiations until the confirmation of everything (Interview 03).

The church building was demolished in June 1997. Before its demolition, almost a thousand worshippers attended the last service on 11 May 1997, during which the Coadjutor Bishop said as they belong to the same Diocese, parishes should not only take care of themselves, but also the development of the whole Diocese (KKP, 18 May 1997).

5.3.2. Conflict between the Diocese and the developer

According to the land registration record, the land ownership of the church building was transferred to Arenal Limited (a subsidiary company of CK¹¹) on 21 May 1997. This is a usual practice for a property developer to establish a new company for each new construction project in Hong Kong. Arenal Limited was founded on 20 September 1994, much earlier than the official timeframe of the redevelopment project.

Following the demolition, there was another round of conflict on church design. The form of a church is not only related to aesthetical expectations, but also to the practices and imaginations of community and religion (Dafydd Jones, 2018). As he explains, while the architectural forms of a sacred space might signify and facilitate its function, the lived spatial practices of modifying and adapting the ritual facilities originate from the dialectical relation between the spatial representations conceived by the institutional managers and the representational space lived by the worshippers (p. 183). To take this point further, it is important to consider how these ideas are linked to different property claims and to understand how the form of sacred space is restricted by legal authorities.

To provide a discussion platform, the Diocese formed a task force comprised of professional laity, parish representatives and Diocesan representatives. The task force was responsible to submit the collected opinions to the Diocese for further negotiation with CK. Fukushima and Doi (2013) summarized how this professional-led task force worked from its first meeting on 29 September 1998 to its dismissal in November 2001. We also inspected the archived minutes of this task force in the parish. The task force proposed the design theme of the church and commented on the design plans. The discussion was relatively fair and open between the parish and the Diocese. For example, the task force proposed to construct an attic above the church to provide five activity rooms, and CK agreed to implement it.

Materials and furniture removed from the demolished church building were stored in the Catholic Cemetery. The Diocese invited the task force to decide whether those materials could be re-used in designing the new church. While the task force adopted a new design based on a Bible story, the redeveloped church retained the old church bell and the front side of the altar. The altar and the bell have significant theological meaning because these are important objects in religious rituals, making the space sacred. They placed the bell from the old church bell tower on the ground floor, and the front-side of the altar on the wall as a decoration. The

¹¹ According to the annual report of CK, Arenal Limited was established as a property development company which is solely owned by CK.

objects were physically retained but cannot perform their original functions. Though having a different setting, the parishioners seek a church design alluding to its history. Due to a strong sense of community, they invoke their past experiences to make their property claims to the church.

While the Diocese fulfilled their responsibilities of stewarding worshippers by providing a place of worship in accordance with the religious logic, it had to compromise when proposals might violate the secular logic of the joint venture with the developer. An incident showed that the task force was constrained by the redevelopment agreement. The parish strongly requested to install a prominent Catholic cross on the façade. The Diocese reported that CK did not accept this request unless the sign was to be only placed on the side wall. The Diocese explained that their right to use the external walls were not given by the agreement with CK. The task force eventually compromised, as the Diocese must not violate the agreed contract of the joint venture with CK (Photo 1). Similarly, as Slyomovics (1996, pp. 214-215) concludes in a study on Muslim sacred space, while the worshippers would agree ‘a mosque requires little more than a property or rented space, many seek such impressive buildings’ because worshippers have a picture of what makes a sacred space ‘real’ in their minds. In our case, the parishioners also shared a spatial imagination about how a church should look like. According to the religious logic, it is reasonable to put up a Catholic cross which represents Jesus Christ’s holiness. Having a symbolic and visible sign is not only a fulfilment of aesthetical expectations about a church but also an expression of the worshippers’ religious belief. Since the developer exercised the terms of joint venture based on their authoritative claim of ownership right to the property, the religious organization had to sacrifice this religious-driven element in the architectural form under the market-driven society.



Photo 1. The sidewall next to the entrance of OLMC (photo taken by the first author in 2016).

Church redevelopment is a process of remaking the sacred space. These conflicting property claims show that the land system defines the terrain for property struggles. Through different legal instruments such as land lease, private property rights and land ownership, conflicting property claims are settled. Those who claim a legally recognized property ownership right can often dominate the struggles.

5.4. The denouement

During the four-year construction period, the parishioners used a nearby Catholic school hall for Sunday services (with a capacity of one hundred people) and two commercial properties in Wan Chai for weekday services, office and activity rooms (Map 1). These school hall and commercial properties rented for the daily operations of the church can be considered as the two types of precarious sacred spaces, borrowing from Dafydd Jones's (2018) conceptualization. The parishioners appropriated the school hall for ritual purpose as a makeshift sacred space. As this place was used for the school assembly on weekdays, the parishioners could only change its setting on Sunday by setting up the altar and the seats for worshippers and bringing in the liturgical objects. After finishing the services, this temporary site of worship must be reverted to its original state. A similar lack of sacrality was also found in the commercial building as a contingent sacred space that was diverted from the original function. As it was only a rented space for a relatively short term, the parishioners did not spend much efforts in transforming it. Under the short-term lease of the commercial building unit, the property owner also imposed constraints and restrictions of changing its form, even it was used for daily ritual purpose.

Since the place of worship and other facilities were not satisfactory, many parishioners opted to leave the community. While a Diocesan representative suggested this was normal that the number of parishioners would temporarily reduce during redevelopment (Interview 03), one of our interviewees who left and returned in the mid-2000s said, 'It was weird to attend meetings in a commercial building. Every Sunday I attended the Mass and then I left immediately after the Mass, because I did not feel the sense of community. After the Mass, everyone left immediately. There was even no place for us to talk' (Interview 01). The precarious status of the sacred space hindered and altered the religious and community practices that the parishioners used to have, influencing the faith of the worshippers.

Although the parish was negatively impacted during the construction period, there was a news report on KKP revealed the 'optimistic attitude' of the parishioners in September 1998, which was slightly different from what happened in the task force. Coincidentally, the page before it reported that CK donated HKD 8 million to the Cathedral in supporting the church repairs and maintenances. Cardinal Wu, the then Bishop of Hong Kong, accepted the cheque in person, from Victor Li, the then vice-president of CK, during the Sunday Mass on 30 August 1998. This high-profile donation was reported on KKP in lengthy paragraphs. The archived materials show CK asked for the return of half of the donation after the Cathedral had completed the maintenance project in 1999. CK asserted this money was needed for the interior furnishing of OLMC, but, according to the joint venture agreement, the interior furnishing costs were supposed to be covered by the Diocese side. Moreover, the costs were actually covered by the parish fundraising programme and the Diocese (KKP, 9 July 2000; 19 November 2000).

The new OLMC opened on 10 November 2001. The ceremony was presided by Cardinal Wu, crowded with more than 700 participants. Extra seats were added in the lobby and the attic in order to accommodate the worshippers in limited space (KKP, 18 November 2001). During the ceremony, Cardinal Wu said, 'church is a home which is formed by love, different from house which is saleable and rentable'. Meanwhile, CK earned a huge profit from the sale of the 170 flats.

Recent development of the parish has exposed the inadequacy of space. Because of the high enrolment of Sunday School, the five activity rooms at the attic are insufficient. It turns out that the parish needs to use facilities of a nearby Catholic school to satisfy the demand for space. Moreover, our field visit has discovered that many extra seats are placed in the lobby to accommodate large number of worshippers. This has become a challenge in the remaking of the sacred space because the parish

is a community of people, but the inadequate space can hardly enable worshippers to fully participate. These observations have rebutted the Diocese's justification for the reduction of the church size due to the declining number of worshippers in Wan Chai. It is logical to conclude that the Diocese's prediction of the reduction in worshippers was to provide the rationality of their property claim for redevelopment.

6. Unpacking the property struggles

Property struggles are common in almost all the cities. The powerful who control the property benefit from the redevelopment projects, while the powerless who struggle against development is usually the loser. Such a universal experience, however, should not stop us from unpacking property struggles. This 'usual' case has become a too dominating discourse due to the property regimes which determine the hegemonic way how people imagine their property relations. One way to challenge this regime is to decipher how people claimed their property rights in alternative manners, even though these are frequently suppressed and formally unacknowledged. Such claims are a window onto the politics of property because they can challenge and mobilize the 'forces that maintain property' and are 'contested ideologically, legally, practically' (Cockburn et al., 2017, p. 2).

6.1. Emergence of the conflicting property claims

During the fierce debates with the parishioners, the Diocese made a firm claim to the OLMC property by saying that 'this is a property of the Diocese'. This is based on the land lease which is a legal document that clearly indicates the landlord-tenant relations between the government and the Diocese. This constrained reading of property, narrowly following the legal text, has shaped the Diocese's claim throughout the redevelopment process. Undoubtedly this ownership claim is absolutely legal, but it is also hegemonic that rejects the possibilities of articulating other ways to read the property. Moreover, given the hierarchical structure of Catholicism, religious leaders have the authority to initiate personnel appointments and make final decisions at all levels, and the parishioners have the moral responsibility to obey. In addition to the right to own, there are also other property rights, namely the rights to occupy and use. The developer also claimed the right to the property in accordance with the legal documents, including the lease and the agreement of the joint venture. After the land title transfer, the developer had the decisive and absolute power in the redevelopment process as long as the joint venture agreement had not been violated. For this reason, the developer had the right to not putting the Catholic symbol outside the redeveloped property, for example. With these property claims, the

Diocese partnered with the developer and gained benefits from this church redevelopment project. But these claims implied that the church considered the land property as a bounded space at the fixed time, which is isolated from the wider socio-spatial dynamics and the historicity of the space. The parishioners were saddened by these property claims which ignored their long-term contributions and footprints inside this space.

Parishioners' struggles over space were invoked by their previous experiences and memories in the historical geography of this church property. The land was purchased by the parishioners who contributed to improve and maintain this place for many decades. The Catholic Diocese, yet, had the absolute power over the control of land because it was the legal land holder. The parishioners actually had no choice but negotiated with the Diocese for a better arrangement. In addition to property ownership right, it is also important to consider what rights that the sacred space users should have (Dafydd Jones, 2018), such as the right of not to be excluded (Blomley, 2016). The parishioners were upset by not being informed of this tremendous change to their church because they contended that their involvement in the parish should be recognized, and hence they should be included in the decision-making process of redevelopment. Some resistances from below emerged when the parish finally realized that the church had to be demolished. Based on the church history and foreseeable threats to the parish community due to the redevelopment, the parishioners have asserted their claims to the property: although the Diocese legally owned the property, the parishioners were the ones who have been managing, using, maintaining and improving the property. As mediated by the property, the social network of the parish and its surrounding neighborhood developed over time. Although these attempts were 'under the shadow of powerful forms of capitalist exclusion' (Blomley, 2016, p. 90), they reveal the alternative imaginations of property from religious logic and humanized value.

Despite the parish's negotiation, they had to compromise on the remaking of sacred space under the unequal power relations with the Diocese and the developer. Following the demolition of the church and the transfer of land ownership, the redevelopment took four years during which the parish did not have a common space for parishioners to maintain the community and hence, discouraging some parishioners from staying.

6.2. Religion-driven and market-driven logics during the hegemonic redevelopment

The redevelopment of OLMC echoes the trajectory of urban development in Hong Kong. This redevelopment began with the Diocese's need to construct new churches and expand the missionary work into new towns. In the colonial Hong Kong, religious organizations performed a pivotal

role to provide social welfare and services among which education is of utmost importance. Offering religious services in school has long been accepted by the Government¹². However, after the Sino-British Joint Declaration¹³ was signed in 1984, the future autonomy of schools greatly concerned the religious organizations, including the Catholic Diocese. They worried that educational facilities might be resumed by the government after 1997. As a result, they considered constructing standalone church buildings as an urgent agenda item (Interview 11). Although it is possible that the government may resume land under private treaty grants, at least the Basic Law has protected the private property rights on provisions. During the last decade of the colonial rule, the Diocese was granted land for church buildings. In pursuit for liquidation to cover the construction cost, the Diocese had to follow the market-driven logics to form a joint venture with a developer. Without changing the G/IC zoning, the Diocese and CK, in a joint venture, redeveloped OLMC which was in fair condition in terms of hardware and software.

In the capitalist society, the religious organizations have encountered difficulties in fulfilling their religious missions. They are sometimes discouraged from insisting some valuable religious principles because of the constraints imposed by the developers. Although the parishioners think that the joint venture with the developer who masters the technical knowledge on planning, law and policies (Leffers, 2018) has restricted their right to religious life, the Diocese did not consider itself as a passive actor in the negotiation process. The Diocese, assisted by a group of lawyers and other professionals, was competent to deal with the developer in a business environment (Interview 12). As Qian and Kong (2018b, p. 174) observed in their study of a Buddhism monastery, religious organization is 'heavily involved in land and property speculation'. Religious organizations, being influenced by the market-driven logics and practices, are alienated from their missions through their active involvement in land activities. In fact, this was observed in the nineteenth century when the Catholic Mission speculated land at prime locations in the Victoria City as documented by Ha (2018).

Church redevelopment is deeply locked in the hegemonic construction of the land (re)development regime which is made possible by all sections of society including government, professionals, business people, charitable

¹² 29th April 1981, 'Grants of Land for Places of Worship', HKRS34-9-1 'Executive Council Papers (Restricted) for Half Year Ending 30th June 1981', Hong Kong Government Records Service.

¹³ The Sino-British Joint Declaration determined the sovereignty transfer to China in 1997.

organizations and the general public (Lee and Tang, 2017). From the case study, it is obvious that religious organizations have been actively involved in land activities, though their rationale and decisions are subject to the developers who still dominated the game. Yet, their participation in redevelopment is indeed motivated by a religious incentive to serve more people in the newly developed areas. Under a property-led society, religious organizations have no choice but to be influenced by the prevailing market-driven logics and practices and to use redevelopment as a means to achieve their religious goals. Without the investment of developers, religious organizations are often unable to be benefited from urban (re)development. It is also inevitable for religious organizations to make use of developers for the expertise in dealing with the technical, legal and political issues during the redevelopment process.

7. Conclusion: Centrality of property relations to urban struggles

It is argued here that property relations, as mediating the relations between people, are central to understand urban struggles. In a property-led society like Hong Kong, church has the characteristic of being a property, in addition to its nature of sacred space. Property struggles of church redevelopment occur in the intersections between the church property and the authoritative legal system of land. To the specificity of the OLMC case, the authorities at work in this property struggle are the inherent hierarchy of Catholicism and the legally recognized property ownership. In this article, we have identified different property claims made by the key stakeholders involved in the OLMC redevelopment as an example of urban struggles. Some of the claims emerge from the dominating ownership model, while some from the past collective experiences on the property. Considering church redevelopment as property struggles reveals the contestations between religious and secular logics and values, which result in different readings of a church as a property that lead to the emergence of conflicting property claims.

This article, contributing to the two strands of geographical research on law and religion, has the following implications. Firstly, it situates the religious-secular debates in the context of property-led urban societies. To what extent property development has alienated the religious landscape and hence secularized the social relations can frame a research theme worth exploring in other property-led societies, like the western liberal societies where politics historically intertwined with religion and cities in the global south where folk religions are still influential. This article illustrates how the conflicting property claims, both legally and socially, reinforced the property struggles in the religious landscape. Secondly, to

go beyond studying declining churches and new forms of sacred spaces in the field of religious geography, the OLMC case highlights the precarity of the remaking of sacred spaces in urban redevelopment. The issue of precarity in relation to the hierarchy of the religious organizations and the vulnerability of the church communities can be further explored in the studies of religious landscape. Thirdly, studies of urban struggles can engage more with alternative conceptions of property. Works in legal geography probe the taken-for-granted conception of property in many capitalist cities. As property is central to urban struggles, how the property claims made by the exploited could be empowered to challenge the hegemonic urban redevelopment would be a timely geographical enquiry. Lastly, religious property, similar to private property, is hegemonic as it enables the property owner to exercise the right to exclude others (Blomley, 2016). Through the property lens, this article offers to view church properties as a complex web of socio-spatial relations in which people are entitled to collective rights to public life and rights of not being excluded from their religious life.

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