Smart Cultural Precinct in Central, Hong Kong

Smart Cultural Precinct

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Abstract

The Smart Cultural Precinct (SCP) is an ongoing initiative to create a cultural district in Central, Hong Kong. This cultural district consists of the area between and around three historical buildings, the Central Market, the Police Married Quarters (PMQ), and Tai Kwun. In order to support the development of this district, we focused on determining the walkability and accessibility of the streets, gaining community insight and perspectives through surveys, and finding suitable locations to host community events. By analysing the walkability/accessibility study and survey results, we determined accessible and walkable locations for potential events that will bring the community together and preserve the community's history and cultural vibrancy. Our team developed a website to organise accessibility data and provide accessible routes as needed, share stories regarding the history of streets and buildings within the SCP, and promote community-building events.

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What is a Cultural District?

In Hong Kong, as in many modern cities, the fast-paced urban life reduces the opportunities to spend time with others in the community. Some critical factors that influence quality of life are urban vibrancy, community, and one's cultural identity. These elements play a crucial role in making cities not only enjoyable but also comfortable to live in [1]. All of these elements are intertwined and each contributes to the overall well-being and quality of life of the community.

Urban vibrancy encompasses the spirit and liveliness that gives character to a specific area [2]. This vibrancy is an essential factor for creating spaces where individuals can interact and participate in a variety of experiences that enhance their daily lives and bring them closer to their culture and community. In addition, the strength and quality of relationships among individuals encompass a network of support, a sense of belonging, and an opportunity for community engagement, which contributes significantly to one's well-being and perception of being part of a larger whole [3]. Furthermore, the connection between the community and its culture is preserved, with their shared cultural heritage and traditions not only fostering a sense of belonging and purpose, but also amplifying their sense of pride, enriching their identity and overall well-being [4].

A cultural precinct is a designated area within a city that is focused on promoting arts, culture, and heritage through the presence of cultural facilities, activities, and events. These areas are created to foster a strong connection with cultural heritage, enabling communities to celebrate and revitalise their unique traditions and values, thus enhancing their sense of pride and belonging. They serve as hubs of cultural engagement and expression, fostering urban vibrancy and strengthening community ties [5]. Cultural precincts foster a strong connection with cultural heritage, enabling communities to celebrate and revitalise their unique traditions and values, thus enhancing their sense of pride, belonging, and overall well-being.

Our project focuses on the Cultural Triangle located in Central, Hong Kong, as shown in Figure 1, consisting of the area between three historically important landmarks; the former Police Married Quarters (PMQ), the Tai Kwun, and the Central Market. This area was chosen because of its central location within Hong Kong and because of the historical landmarks that can be found within the triangle. The Smart Cultural Precinct (SCP) is an organisation that encourages community engagement, participation, and social connections through different social events. Events should offer a variety of programs that
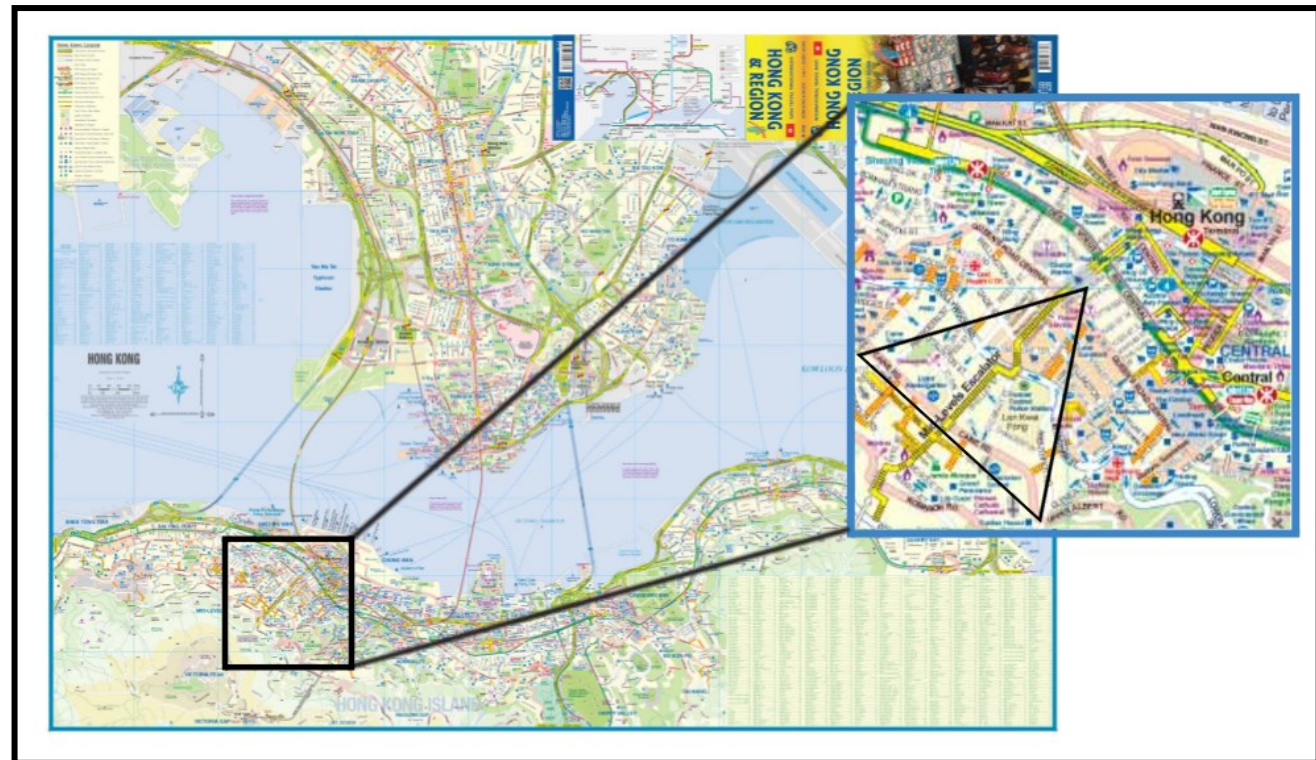

Figure 1: Travel Map of Central, Hong Kong [6]

cater to different interests and facilitate interactions among community members.

Effective communication about events and opportunities within the precinct is essential to its success and providing a digital platform for interaction and participation opportunities can enhance community involvement, and preserve the community's cultural history through the sharing of stories. By addressing these key areas, a cultural precinct can significantly contribute to the quality of life of the Hong Kong community, offering a vibrant, connected, and culturally rich environment. Combining newly collected with past data, this project proposes street locations as well as activities for local social events. In addition, we describe how to visualise accessibility on a digital platform for public use, elevating the urban vibrancy, and ultimately the quality of life for the community.

Creating a Cultural District within Central

Developing a cultural precinct in Hong Kong is an initiative to improve the quality of life of Hong Kongers by preserving their culture and increasing the vibrancy of the community. Focusing pedestrian flow and activity within the cultural precinct is crucial for enhancing quality of life because it promotes cultural richness, attracts talent, boosts business, and enhances public health and well-being [4]. While recognizing the hurdles in implementing changes, we can offer a practical, location-based approach to preserve and celebrate the rich cultural heritage of Central, Hong Kong. However, for a cultural precinct to truly enhance the quality of life, it

Figure 2: Happy Sunday Event in India [8]

must be accessible to the entire population [7]. Ensuring the precinct is accessible provides opportunities for cultural exchange for all members of the community. Therefore, evaluating the current accessibility and walkability within the Triangle, and incorporating community feedback on the walkability of the SCP area, is crucial in the development of a cultural precinct.

Happy Sunday Event Concept

To enhance urban liveliness and promote a better sense of community, some cities have implemented regularly scheduled social events that unite communities. "Happy Sunday" is an event that occurs in various cities in India, held on the first Sunday of every month. Typically, a section of a street up to one kilometre is blocked off each Sunday and becomes an area specifically

for pedestrians. One example is the city of Tiruppur in India, as seen in Figure 2. With a rich array of activities including but not limited to dance, music, yoga, zumba, art, games, and food, these gatherings have become fixtures in the city's social calendar[8]. Another city that has implemented Happy Sundays in their community is Gurugram, India. With activities for both children and adults, Gurugram's Happy Sunday events have brought the community together and improved their cultural precinct [9]. In Hong Kong, hosting Happy Sunday-like events in a popular setting, like the SCP, would be very beneficial. By providing opportunities for citizens to connect and participate in activities that will foster a sense of shared belonging. Following our exploration of the cultural precinct and its potential for hosting enriching community events, it becomes clear that such events must not only be enjoyable but also accessible to everyone.

Importance of a Walkability Study

Walkability refers to the measure of how friendly an area is for walking; it encompasses various factors such as the presence, size, and condition of sidewalks, accessibility, street connectivity, access to amenities, and overall pedestrian experience [10]. Areas with strong walkability and a well-connected network of streets facilitate efficient navigation throughout an area and encourage visitors to freely explore the area in its entirety [11]. Within the cultural precinct, this would encourage people who attend the events to explore all parts of the district. Assessing streets based on walkability helps to ensure that cultural events are hosted on streets that are convenient, accessible, and pedestrian-friendly. While a previous walkability study done by the Civic Exchange in Hong Kong focused on how comfortable and efficient it is to walk around the area, the study focused less on accessibility [12]. Therefore, evaluating the current accessibility and walkability within the Triangle, and incorporating community feedback on the walkability of the SCP area, is crucial in the development of a cultural precinct.

Importance of Community Input

Direct input from the community is indispensable for understanding its preferences, needs, and opinions, which might not be entirely captured through a walkability study alone. Drawing from insights in "The Art of City-Making," a book that discusses the strategies and dilemmas of urban development, one crucial aspect is the importance of soliciting endorsement and input from all community members to ensure community support in its development. This concept emphasises "the art of adding value and values simultaneously" for all individuals, underscoring the dual objectives of enhancing the area's value while respecting and incorporating the values of its inhabitants [13]. Moreover, understanding transportation preferences and accessibility concerns through community feedback helps in designing a digital platform that provides easy access to events, ensuring that the Cultural Triangle is a welcoming and inclusive space for everyone. By addressing barriers to participation, the precinct can attract a wider audience, enhancing its vibrancy and appeal. Integrating community feedback with a walkability study provides a comprehensive understanding of not only the opportunities but also the challenges in developing events that resonate with and are accessible to the community.

Benefits of a Digital Tool

Other cultural precincts use digital tools to engage and connect with their communities. For example, Brisbane, Australia developed an application (app) for their cultural precinct in the South Bank that has successfully helped to bring the community together. Their app features a section showcasing events in the area that can beare organised by type, date, and location. A section of the app allows businesses to request to be added to the app so they can display information and advertise on the app [14]. Another example of a digital tool for a cultural precinct is a previous WPI project group that proposed the development of an app to be used in the SCP. Two features that they implemented were a listing of key businesses in the area and a list of events [15].

By leveraging digital tools, cultural precincts can effectively promote events to a wider audience and facilitate interaction between community members [16]. Introducing features tailored to assist individuals with accessibility needs also fosters inclusivity and enhances the overall user experience for the whole community. Digital tools that effectively promote events and facilitate communication can significantly increase participation among community members [17]. By showcasing cultural activities and providing interactive features, such as event listings and business directories, we encourage active involvement and exploration of the SCP,

ultimately enhancing community quality of life and fostering a sense of belonging.

Methodology

Drawing from the insights discussed in our background research, we developed a comprehensive set of methods to effectively execute our objectives within the project. These objectives include determining the walkability and accessibility in Central, gaining community insight through the conduction of surveys, and creating a website for the Hong Kong community. Once executed, the best locations and ideas for community events can be determined and accessibility information on Central can be shared with the Hong Kong citizens.

Objective One: Determining the Walkability and Accessibility in Central

We conducted a walkability study to assess the condition, accessibility, and availability of amenities of streets in Central. It is important to locate streets that are accessible to all, especially when considering "Happy Sunday" inspired community events, which emphasise community and inclusion. Studying the accessibility of the streets and sharing the observations and data gathered will draw attention to the streets that are not accessible, like Aberdeen Street in Figure 3, to emphasise the need for improvement.

The sidewalk incline, width, and

Figure 3. Aberdeen Street, Central, Hong Kong [18]

condition heavily affect the accessibility of a street, so it is important to weigh these factors when calculating the scores for our walkability study. A street's walkability was evaluated while taking into consideration its proximity to restaurants, stores, and public transportation access. Safety protocols were assessed by

evaluating the existence of features such as grooved plates before intersections and rails between the streets and sidewalks [19, see Section 1]. We used mobile phone apps to measure the incline of each street, and tape measures to determine average sidewalk width.

Data from one street was gathered as a group to ensure that the collecting process remained consistent throughout the study. We then split into two groups to collect data for the remaining streets for efficiency, however, accessibility was more difficult to determine without firsthand experience. This resulted in a reliance on ADA guidelines[20] to make educated inferences on wheelchair accessibility [19, see Section 1].

Objective Two: Gaining Community Insight

To gain more insight into the community's perspectives on walkability in Central, and the future of the SCP, we then conducted surveys around Hong Kong. Due to the bustling nature of Central, we chose more leisurely locations to distribute our survey, where people would be more willing to participate. These locations were the Institute of Sustainable Urbanisation (ISU) Playroom @ SCP event at the H6 Conet within the SCP, the Chinese University of Hong Kong campus, and the Hong Kong University campus. Participants could scan QR codes on their own device or our personal iPad [19, see Section 2] to access the Google Form. Participants were asked a series of questions ranging from their preferred method of transportation when travelling to Central, their

age range, which streets they enjoyed walking down the most, and their interest in attending community events [19, see Section 3]. These questions helped us gain insight into how to improve the streets and quality of life in regards to the SCP.

We recognized the importance of facilitating open dialogue and overcoming the challenges we faced during this stage. However, the language barrier and written translation between Traditional Chinese and English limited our results to only written responses. Future initiatives might consider conversations or interviews with survey participants, to comprehend their opinions more effectively. In addition, focusing on surveying families and the elderly may provide meaningful information on which events these particular groups would be more interested in attending. Understanding transportation preferences and accessibility concerns for these groups will help in designing an infrastructure that facilitates easy access to these events, ensuring that the Cultural Triangle is a welcoming and inclusive space for everyone. By addressing accessibility issues, the precinct can attract a wider audience, enhancing its vibrancy and appeal. Listening to community feedback and actively working towards resolving their suggestions will create a sense of community representation within the SCP.

Objective Three: Creating a Website for Community Use

One option to provide an outlet for community feedback, as well as inform the public on SCP related topics, is to build a digital tool specifically made for the SCP. We constructed a website prototype for the Hong Kong community, providing them with a platform to read about the history of the area, effectively navigate the precinct with the use of an interactive map tool, and give users the ability to add suggestions for improving the SCP. Some more features include a list of current and upcoming events, an accessibility feature for the interactive map, and thematic background changes that reflect the seasonal ambiance. The majority of the User Interface (UI) was developed using Webflow, a software for building and hosting a website. Webflow itself has limited functionality to support the pathfinding algorithm, so external code was hosted on Github Pages. HTML, CSS, and Javascript was used to create a structure, design, and implement the UI [21]. Several challenges arose throughout the logistic planning of the digital tool, including the security of the tool. The goal is to create a digital ecosystem that not only highlights the cultural vibrancy of our community but also addresses the needs of navigation and communication, making it a cornerstone for community engagement.

Walkability Study Results

The streets within the SCP were ranked using the study's scoring system [19, see Section 1]. The quantitative results from the walkability study are shown in Table 1 below; a perfect score is denoted as a score of 100.

Queens Road Central as seen in Figure 4 scored the highest, followed by Queen Victoria Street (Figure 5) and Jubilee Street (Figure 6).

Street Names:	Score:
Queens Road (Graham to Queen Victoria)	87.16
Queen Victoria Street	67.20
Jubilee Street	64.35
Cochrane St	59.64
Hollywood Rd (End to Shing Wong)	57.56
Lyndhurst Terrace	54.53
Staunton St	53.39
Stanley St (End to Pottinger)	52.96
Ezra Ln (Walkway)	49.11
Sam Ka Ln (Walkway)	44.43
Shelley St (Walkway, End to Staunton)	40.46
Elgin St	39.87
Wellington St (Peel to Lyndhurst)	36.72
Mang Hing Ln	36.62
Gage St	35.76
Aberdeen St (Staunton to Gage)	32.47
Peel St (End to Staunton)	30.64
Staveley St (Walkway, End to Wellington)	28.73
Graham St	28.52
Gutzlaff St	24.26

Table 1: Walkability Score Results from Study

Queens Road scored much higher than the other streets within the SCP, due to its proximity to MTR stations and Mid-Level Escalators, wide and flat sidewalks, and raised lines along the street for those visually impaired which contributed to its high score. Queen Victoria Street and Jubilee Street scored lower, but still

Figure 4 (Left): Queens Road Central

Figure 5 (Center): Queen Victoria Road

Figure 6 (Right): Jubilee Street

higher than the rest of the streets within the Triangle, due to their proximity to the MTR station and Mid-Level Escalators, but incline at the end of the streets reflected in its results.

Survey Response Results

Given our 61 responses, the data was analysed and gathered from each survey question, as seen in Figures 7, 8, and 9. From the people who responded, the analysis revealed a clear preference for using the MTR as the primary mode of transport to get to Central, many visiting Central with plans for dining, entertainment, and shopping intentions, and some enjoying walking down Queens Road when in Central. When given the option to explain their reasoning, people wrote that the amount of shopping opportunities, lack of traffic, and cleanliness of the street were important to them. Such attributes enhance the pedestrian experience and impact a street's suitability for hosting community gatherings.

By asking about their age as seen in the chart in Figure 10 and comparing responses to different questions by age range, correlations were found between respondents' opinions about certain topics and their age [19, see Section 4]. For example, we found that the younger survey respondents enjoy going to Central for entertainment reasons, while older generations go to Central for shopping. A common reason that all generations share in going to Central is for food, this observation shows that paying attention to the various restaurants in the SCP can be a selling factor in attracting people to attend events.

After analysing the results from the survey, the weights for the walkability score were changed to better suit the priorities of pedestrians. The older generation was more likely to walk [19, see Section 4], so the weights for the accessibility scores, such as sidewalk width and incline were increased. Also, seeing the frequency of MTR usage in comparison to the other modes of transportation as shown in Figure 8, the weights of bus transportation were lowered and the weights for MTR stations were increased [19, see Section 1].
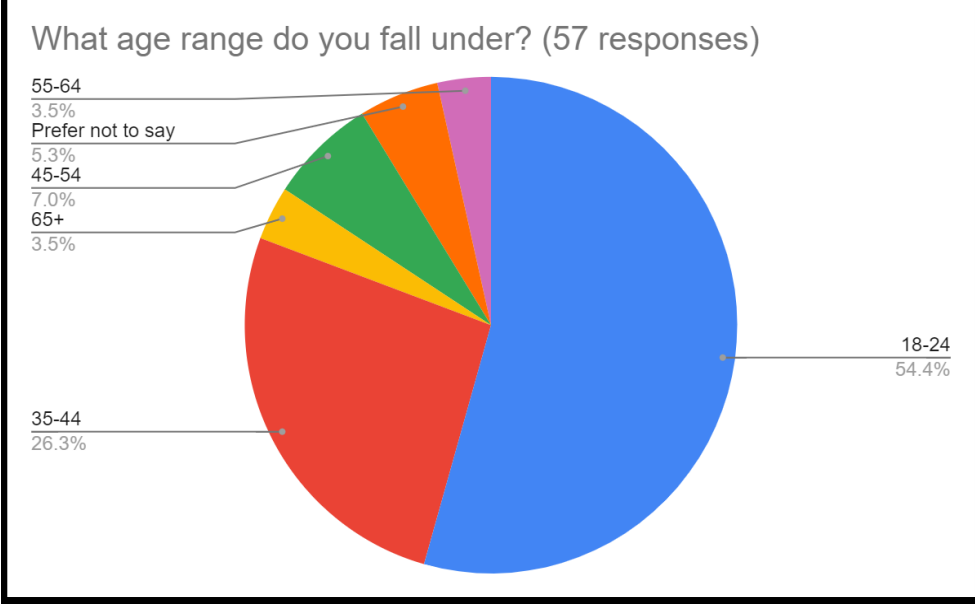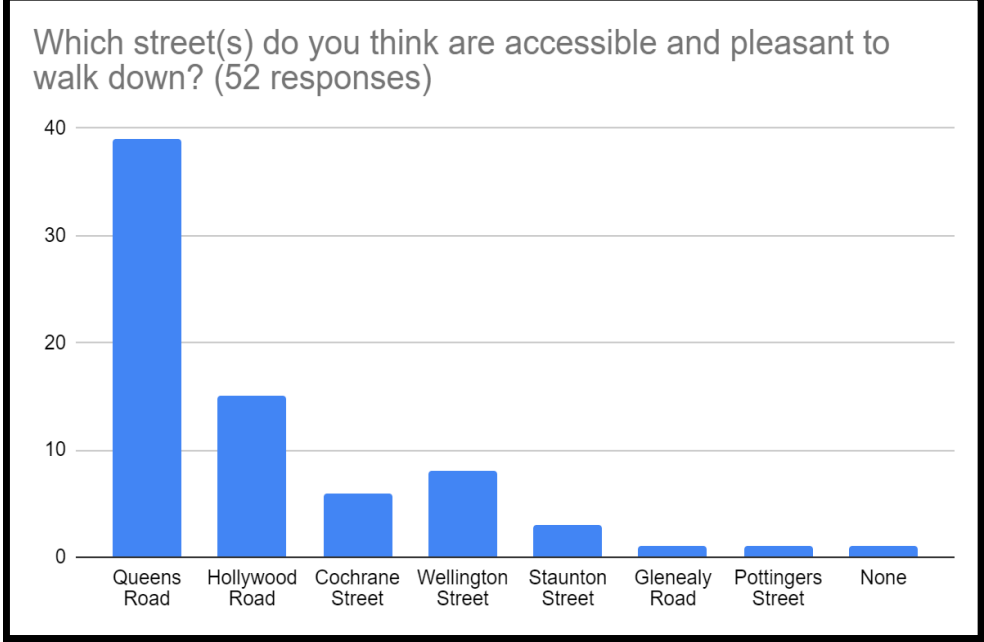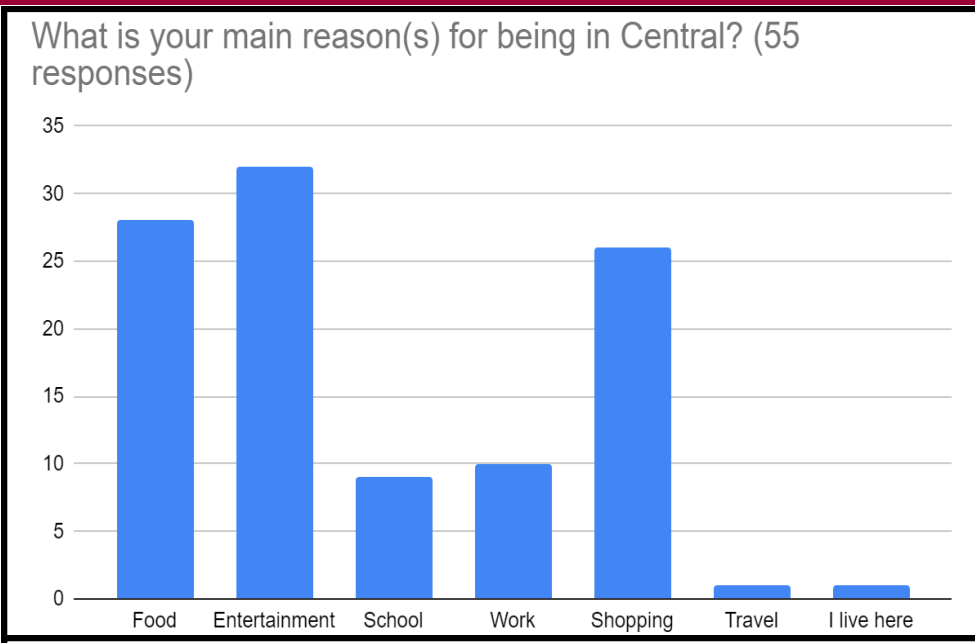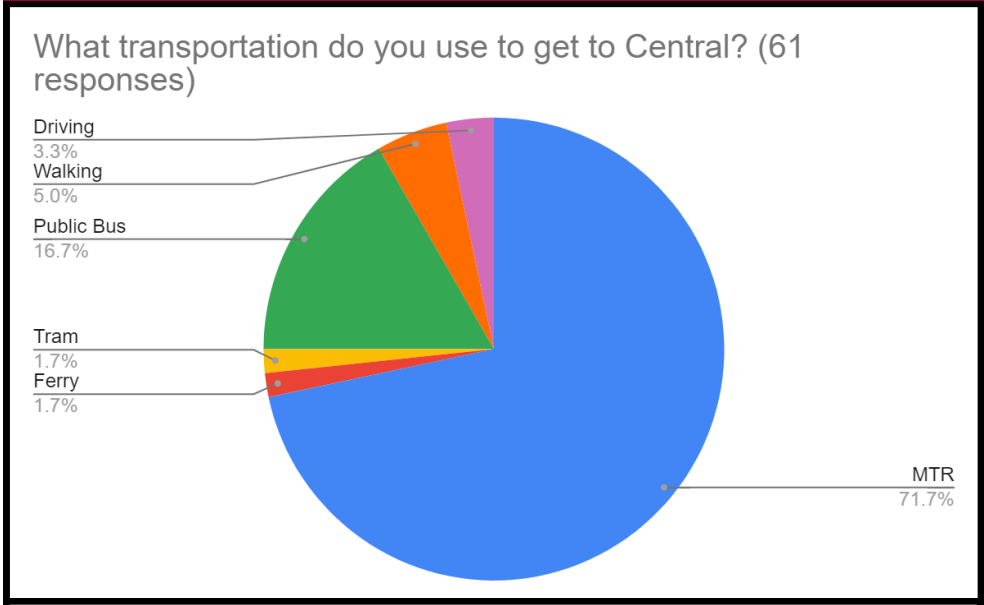
What transportation do you use to get to Central? (61 responses)

- Driving 3.3%
- Walking 5.0%
- Public Bus 16.7%
- Tram 1.7%
- Ferry 1.7%
- MTR 71.7%

What is your main reason(s) for being in Central? (55 responses)

Category	Value
Food	28
Entertainment	32
School	9
Work	10
Shopping	26
Travel	1
I live here	1

Which street(s) do you think are accessible and pleasant to walk down? (52 responses)

Street	Value
Queens Road	39
Hollywood Road	15
Cochrane Street	6
Wellington Street	8
Staunton Street	3
Glenealy Road	1
Pottingers Street	1
None	1

What age range do you fall under? (57 responses)

- 55-64 3.5%
- Prefer not to say 5.3%
- 45-54 7.0%
- 65+ 3.5%
- 18-24 54.4%
- 35-44 26.3%

Figure 7 (Top Left): Responses to Modes of Transportation

Figure 8 (Bottom Left): Responses to Pleasant and Walkable Streets

Figure 9 (Top Right): Responses to Reasons to be in Central (Note: Multiple answers per respondent allowed)

Figure 10 (Bottom Right): Age Responses to Those Surveyed
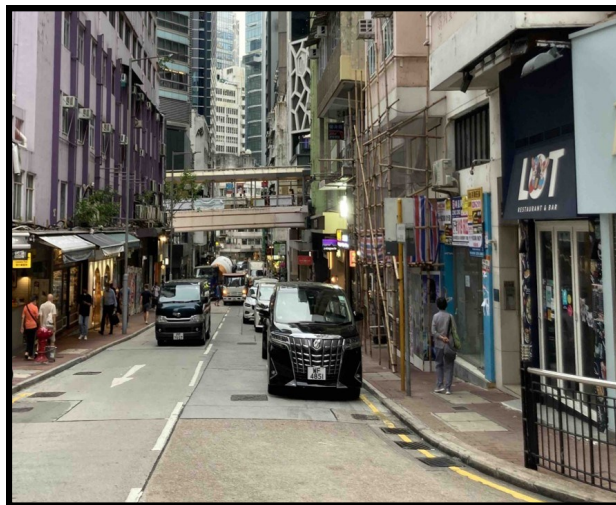
Community Event Locations

In order to determine the optimal streets for a community-building event, results and analysis from both the surveys and the pedestrian study were combined with general observations of the vehicle and pedestrian traffic on the streets. The walkability study identified the following top seven streets: Queens Road, Queen Victoria Street, Jubilee Street, Cochrane Street, Hollywood Road, Lyndhurst Terrace, and Staunton Street. Observations were conducted throughout to help narrow down the list of streets to three streets that are viable to host events. Streets like Queens Road and Queen Victoria Road were removed due to heavy traffic, as blocking off a street with high vehicle or pedestrian traffic would cause more disruptions, but as stated previously, Jubilee Street rated high and appeared with lower traffic patterns. The next streets in our ranking, omitting those with high levels of vehicle traffic and steep inclines, were Staunton Street and Lyndhurst Terrace. Therefore, Jubilee Street, Staunton Street, and Lyndhurst Terrace[19, see Section 5] are recommended to host community events.

Jubilee Street (Figure 6) has wide sidewalks and is close to the Central Market, one of the points of the SCP. Staunton Street (Figure 11) has many restaurants and shopping options, connecting the PMQ with the Tai Kwun, the other two of the points making up the triangle within the SCP. The street also has minimal amounts of both pedestrian and vehicle traffic. Lyndhurst Terrace (Figure 12) is centrally located within the Triangle, has wide sidewalks, and is one of the flatter streets. The street also has many restaurants, shops, and public trash cans [19, see

Figure 11 (Above): Staunton Street, Central, Hong Kong

Figure 12 (Below): Lyndhurst Terrace, Central, Hong Kong

Section 1]. Jubilee Street, Staunton Street, and Lyndhurst Terrace all have direct access to the Mid-Level Escalators, making them accessible and reachable for community events resulting in these three streets being the top chosen locations for event hosting.

Community Event Types

With entertainment being the top reason people go to the Central District, it is important to include several entertainment opportunities in community events, like live musical and dance performances. Music serves as a connector between people and cultures, benefiting and improving the quality of life and social connection within a community [22]. By incorporating diverse musical and dance performances into our event, from traditional Chinese music to contemporary genres, we aim to provide experiences that foster a sense of cultural pride and identity across several age groups. Research supports the idea that music significantly enhances social connections, through mechanisms such as increased empathy, trust, and cooperation, thereby contributing to a stronger, more cohesive community [23].

Food being presented as the second largest reason for people to go to Central shows that people would be interested in attending events if there is food, allowing attendees to explore and appreciate the rich diversity of Chinese cuisine. Incorporating tea culture pays homage to Hong Kong's unique historical blend of Chinese and British influences and fosters opportunities for reflection, conversation, and a more profound cultural exchange. Culinary experiences can bridge cultural gaps, bring

Figure 13: Home Screen of Website Prototype

people together, and foster a sense of belonging and mutual respect among diverse groups [24]. Food provided by various organisations and restaurants can operate as a time for family bonding through a group cooking class..

As noted from the Happy Sunday concept, this premise is known for strengthening the bonds

of the community. It has the benefits of sharing stories and history among its population, an increase in community engagement, and the enhancement of public well-being. All these factors contribute to increased quality of life for locations that conduct these events.

Website Development Results

To give the public a platform to share stories about the SCP and to showcase future events, the website was created containing the following pages: Home, Events, Map,

Community, Share Your Story, About Us, and Contact Us[21].

- **Home:** Acts as the central site's main hub and access to all features, as seen in Figure 13.
- **Events:** Lists all current and upcoming events.
- **Interactive Map:** Uses an algorithm that was created to find a path from one location in the SCP to another with an accessibility toggle utilising our walkability data to find alternative paths for those with mobility issues. For example, if someone is unable to use stairs, the accessibility toggle would find the flattest route to the desired location.
- **Community**: Provides a list of the different organisations that can play a role in supporting events. This is to build transparency and trust within the community and establish networking opportunities in the future for the SCP to connect. Businesses can apply to be a part of the event.
- **Share Your Story:** Allows the public to send in submissions about their stories and perspective of the Precinct. Users can share and preserve cultural stories and create a connected community.
- **About Us**: Provide a brief history of the site's organization
- **Contact Us**: Where to submit questions or concerns.

The Administrator and Business perspectives of the platform allow for more direct communication between administrators, sponsors, and local businesses. The administrators are capable of creating events, accepting business and sponsor participation in community events, and approving the submission of stories from the public. The businesses can also apply to participate in events happening in the SCP and manage reviews from previous events.

The website aims to spread awareness of events to the public; through this effort, the attendance of events is likely to increase. An increase in event attendance brings the benefits of events to more people which increases their quality of life as the frequency and popularity of events grow through the website [21].

Conclusion and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to build upon the concept of a Smart Cultural Precinct, an initiative looking to provide the Hong Kong community with an opportunity to slow down and connect with others. The SCP would enable the community to celebrate and revitalise its unique culture and values by holding cultural events in Central, with a focus on bringing everyone in the community together. A walkability study allowed us to analyse the network of Central's street layout, and highlight street characteristics that need to be considered and improved. We conducted surveys to better understand why people like to go to Central, as well as how they get there. We found that most people come to Central for entertainment, food, and shopping purposes and that the older generations are more likely to walk to their destinations than the younger generations. A website prototype provides ISU with a platform to display event information and show accessible routes to destinations within the Cultural Triangle. It also allows us to visualise and share our walkability study data, and will hopefully attract government attention to the streets that need improvements. Our website strives to become a platform for the community to share ideas, history, and art.

We have compiled a list of recommendations for those who will be further pursuing this initiative within the Institute for Sustainable Urbanisation. For event planning, connecting with government, and non-government organisations will allow ISU to gain more insight into the process of hosting larger community events on Sundays. Beginning to host events regularly will gain more public attention and allow the SCP to grow in popularity. When hosting events, we recommend that ISU host events along the flat blocks of Jubilee Street, Staunton Street, and Lyndhurst Terrace. From the data gathered throughout our project, we discovered that these three streets are accessible and wide for people to arrive at and enjoy attending events on. Guiding people to these events, while taking into account citizens' accessibility needs, will increase the number of attendants and their families. Having more walkable streets, in addition to accessible community events, will make Central a more vibrant city, and enhance everyone's quality of life.

The event details and locations should also be easily accessible on our website prototype. The newly created website should first be integrated into the main ISU website, allowing community access, before being converted into a mobile app, to better appeal to the younger generation. The next focus for improving the website should be improving its accessibility functions. The user should have the ability to

change the text between English, Traditional Chinese, and Simplified Chinese, to overcome language barriers. There should also be a function that allows for larger text size, as well as a zoom-in function for those with impaired eyesight. Finally, the mapping tool should have its accessibility-based pathfinding improved, to take into account street features that are not typically displayed on Google Maps (ie. elevators/escalators), as well as avoiding streets under construction. The accessibility toggle should also be broadened, to include a wider scope of accessibility needs.

Prioritising pedestrian-friendly infrastructure and community gathering spots will ensure that the SCP remains a walkable, accessible, and community-centric space. The SCP's goal is to connect people within their community, while also connecting the various prominent locations within Central. This will ultimately make Central, Hong Kong a focal point of cultural expression and community, and enhance the quality of life for its residents and visitors.

Acknowledgements

*Figure 14: Photograph of the WPI Project Team
Left to Right: Benjamin Furman, Jake Schwartz, Jackson Balcazar, Jessica Wong, and Morgan Owen*

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