

SIR NORMAN FOSTER'S UNEXPECTED GUESTS

The cool, gray patch of pricey real estate that sits beneath **Sir Norman Foster's Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank** is the most austere of architectural spaces. It is an ambiguous zone—part private and public, part interior and out-of-doors. Rendered in granite and steel, the garagelike space belongs both to the street and the structure that towers over it. Sitting in the heart of Hong Kong's prestigious Central district, this place is dramatically transformed every weekend. On Sundays the hushed chamber of Modernism is turned into a colorful bazaar, as hundreds of guest workers, mainly single young women from the Philippines and Thailand employed as domestic helpers, gather there with friends to socialize, eat, and buy and sell goods.

202

Such gatherings of foreign domestics in Central is nothing new: the area has been used for years as a meeting place for Hong Kong's maids, amahs (nannies), and other workers. The original gathering point was **Chater Garden and Statue Square**, just north of the Shanghai Bank building. It did not take long, however, for surrounding neighborhoods to be annexed, especially as the number of foreign domestics rose in the 1980s. Today there are approximately 130,000 such workers in Hong Kong, mostly Filipinas.

In spite of its Spartan appearance, the bank plaza is well suited for public gatherings in hot, wet Hong Kong. During the summer temperatures commonly reach 90 degrees, accompanied by extreme humidity and sudden downpours. The darkened space is cool and dry by comparison. Built on a gently sloping surface, the plaza also has the quality of an amphitheater, with just enough grade change to make sitting much more appealing than on a level floor.

Sunday congregations of guest workers there and at other nearby areas have become a contentious issue. You would think the domestics were an invading army rather than the housecleaners and nannies without whom Hong Kong would be in disarray. Shop owners in Central have complained vociferously about the throngs of "birdlike Filipinas" who leave the area littered with rubbish. Others have voiced concern over the implications for tourism: legislator Alfred Tso-Shiu-wai warned recently that the sight of the thousands of maids might "put off" visitors. "It's not scenic," he pointed out.

The lot of domestic helpers in Hong Kong is an unenviable one. Most earn less than \$450 a month—in a city where a shoe-box apartment costs more than twice that—and must leave Hong Kong within two weeks of the termination of their contract. Fear of this rule has frightened many women into remaining silent about incidents of abuse and sexual harassment. Once a worker has complained, she is likely to become tagged a "troublemaker" and find it impossible to land another contract.

Recently there has been a movement to establish recreation centers for the maids throughout the city. But the plan has encountered strenuous opposition and drawn out legions of NIMBYs. Until a suitable alternative is at hand, the Sunday streetscape of Central will continue to host massive ritual gatherings of Hong Kong's domestic workers. And the formidable architecture of Foster's masterpiece will continue to be enlivened by strains of Tagalog and the scent of homemade food. **THOMAS J. CAMPANELLA 03.95**