

Waiting Zone

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY PETER BENZ

Poet Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, "How much of human life is lost in waiting." **Peter Benz** begs to differ. In this article, he discusses his newfound appreciation for the act of queuing.



*"A/B/C/K/N/D"
Kendall's Notation – a standard
system used to statistically describe
and classify a queue*

Every morning, when I take my son to kindergarten, we pass a queue at the local minibus-stop. I am not exaggerating when I say it is at least fifty metres long every day; amidst thousands of other people rushing past them, dozens of men and women of all ages and social backgrounds stand neatly one after the other without any kind of external supervision, marks on the ground or barriers. Admittedly, I only notice it because it takes on a totally different shape every day. This, in turn changes the circulation patterns of the passers-by around it.

Now, it is a well-known fact that queuing is not just an organisational necessity, but actually a lifestyle. Everybody knows that the English like to occasionally stand in line just for fun, and all the rest of the world mockingly looks down on this national oddity despite the other fact that other nationalities – namely those in the former British colonies – are just as sincere about their queues. Compared to the Japanese, for example, even English queues appear like a



This brings me to another observation: not only does the queue as a whole have multi-layered relations with its environment, queuing also changes the spatial perception of those in the line. For instance, a busy street usually considered too dangerous a place to spend any time on is suddenly fit for absent-mindedly reading the papers if one is backed up by a queue. Conversely, people waiting in line at the cashier tend to take special notice of their surroundings out of pure boredom. Supermarkets know this for a fact and therefore fill up those counter shelves with cheap and unhealthy goodies that one wouldn't normally buy if not in a queue.

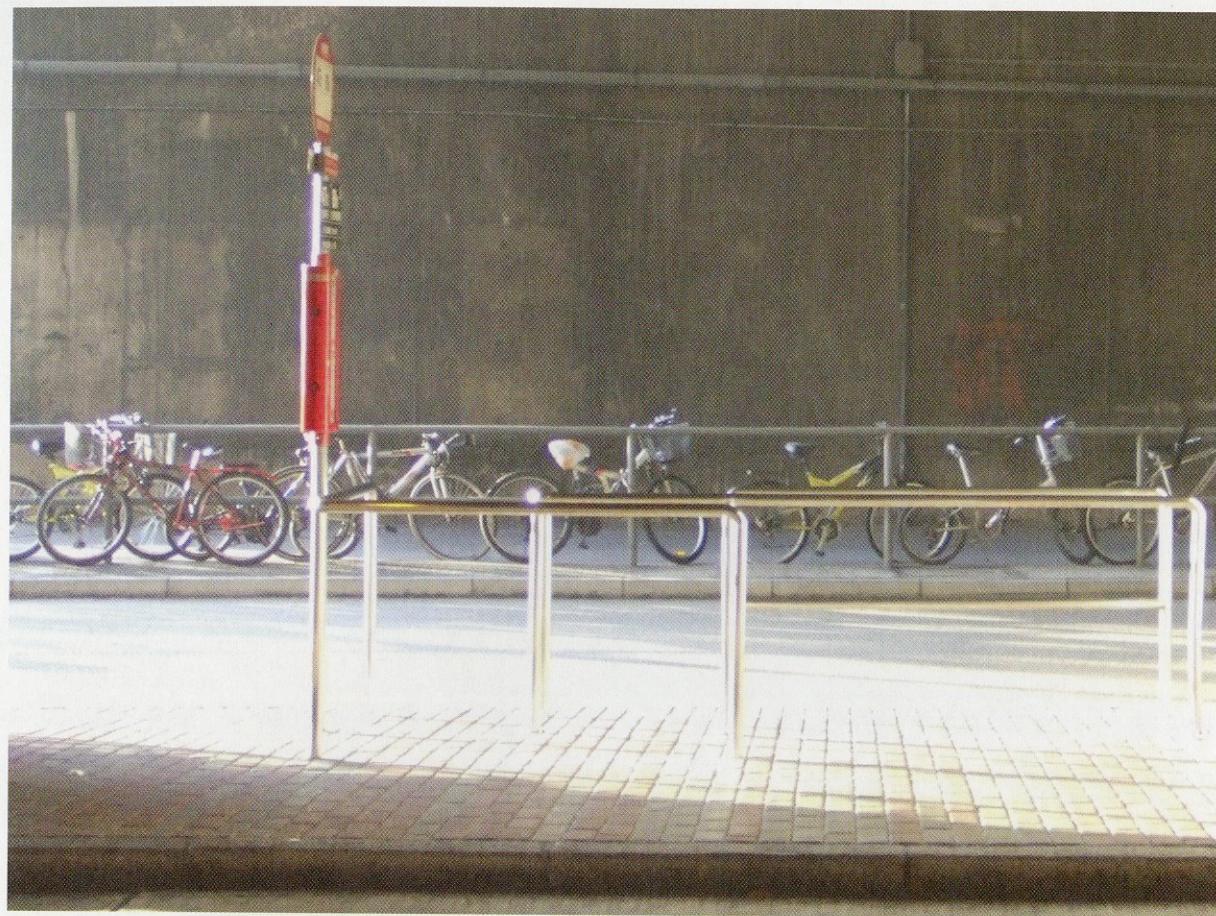
Yet, despite all this potential, architects and designers merely take a very uninterested approach to queuing: they provide some nondescript space dedicated as "waiting zone" and that's it.

Wouldn't it be so much more exciting – maybe even more functional – to utilize the "wall-like" characteristics of a waiting line to flexibly and interactively divide and rearrange a space in accordance to the

tides of incoming people? Some very clever yet subtle system of spatial arrangements organizing people into rows as if on their own accord, re-arranging themselves if they get too long, while immanently also changing the spatial setup of the waiting zone as well as the perspective of those waiting? Couldn't the slow progress of a queue be positively reinterpreted if the surrounding space offered spatial stimuli particularly dedicated to this slowness? Can't waiting be an interesting, and maybe even a liberating experience?

In Fritz Lang's famous movie *Metropolis* (1927), queues play a decisive role in the filmic setup of the space. There, the anonymous and faceless lines of workers moving in and out of their workplaces like robots, visually labelled the city – but also the society – as inhuman and unfree. The queue was a symbol of the totalitarian system of subordination.

Eighty years on, it may be time for a rehabilitation of the waiting line. Despite the fact that standing in line is a time-consuming activity, queues could perhaps be appreciated for other reasons. More so if one is not in them. ■



horde of stampeding longhorn cattle. Anybody who has ever attended the rigorous queues heading for the Emperor's Palace in Tokyo on Emperor's Day can attest to this.

In return, it is also completely true that the Germans take the request to stand in line as a conscious affront against their constitutional right of free mobility, which is probably why I – as a German living abroad – can intellectually accept the benefits of waiting in an orderly line at the cashier, but remain emotionally distant to it.

However, for those people in the habit of queuing, the lack of proper line standing is obviously equally disturbing: it is a common habit of Hong Kongers to voice disapproval over their fellow Chinese from the mainland by arguing: "They don't even know how to queue."

Obviously the size, shape and other characteristics of an environment determine how a queue lines up within it. As there is already a Queueing Theory that allows the calculation of the probable waiting time in a queue, I'm sure there is also some

mathematical algorithm to statistically describe the seemingly random ways in which waiting lines determine themselves spatially. If not, then it sure is time for some eager PhD student to come up with something.

But, as anybody who has ever shared the experience my son and I have every morning will confirm, the queue also – in a very physical way – changes its surrounding space. **Despite being a "chain" of people that should be flexible between its individual links, a queue actually creates a solid albeit temporary wall that can be remarkably unyielding and impenetrable.**

One example is this other queue I regularly observe forming on a small traffic island amidst the evening rush hour. As it is a small traffic island, the tail end of the queue often has to stand on the actual road. Stoically, without even looking up from their iPods, the end of the line will collectively step one step aside for every car nearing – and will then return one step back into their original position on the street! The queue is wagging its tail rather than giving up its space!

