

Alternative Urban Development beyond 2000

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Ever since 1850 when the first reclamation of Hong Kong harbour started in Bonham Strand East, we have been filling up our coastline. There have been constant objections, yet the Government pays little attention. Up to the present, Hong Kong has already created six thousand hectares of reclaimed land, making it possible for our city to become the spectacular metropolis of today. However, all those who witness the rapid changes of the environment would wonder when this vast reclamation of the harbour is ever going to end. On the eve of the new millennium, the general public is more environmentally conscious. Latest proposals of reclamation in Central, Wan Chai and South East Kowloon have received overwhelming objection. The plans have now been returned to the drawing board for reconsideration. This provides us a good opportunity to open up the dialogue to discuss some of the fundamental issues of our city. This paper aims to examine our way of life in Hong Kong and proposes alternatives for the future development of our city to compliment the intended objective of our Government for "Clear Water, Blue Sky" for our city.

Problems of our City

The quest for land has long been in the minds of our previous government. The '82, '84 and '89 Harbour Reclamation, Urban Development and airport studies, as well as the '91 Metro Plan have all aimed at large scale reclamation. The main objective is to provide land for infrastructure, commercial and residential development, housing and other amenities to cater for the growing population. Some have already been realized within a short span of time. However, a number of issues raised by the public have never been fully addressed. The narrowing of the Victoria Harbour will cause alarm to the safety standard for sea traffic and result in inadequate flushing effect with additional environmental problems. The ultimate question, whether the present scenic appearance of the harbour as our precious resource will be destroyed, raises a serious concern. There has also been increasing alarming problems in air and water pollution. Perhaps we should examine our city thoroughly before sacrificing what we have at present.

Hong Kong - the Utopia City

There is perhaps no other city in the world resembling Hong Kong, for better or for worse. Due to our rapid growth and as a city made up of migrants, we have adapted quickly to a fast pace life style, seizing any opportunity as if in a borrowed place in borrowed time. We do not have long term plans. We believe in short cuts, causing the city to develop by leaps & bounces. Examples are Tenement Block concept of the 50's which made way for eight storey walk ups that we are all familiar with. Thirty, forty storey blocks now become the norm as a result of the changes in the Building Regulations. We have come a long way from a quiet fishing village to the assiduous trading port, from a low cost manufacturing centre to a speculative real estate paradise. Today, we are recognized as an important Far East financial centre. If we plan to become a high-tech digital city, we must provide the necessary means to cater for this step.

Architects around the world have visions of utopia in the sixties, ranging from Buckminster Fuller's Floating City, Peter Cook's Plug-in City, Ron Herron's Walking City etc. These concepts prescribe the solutions to high density living and Hong Kong has developed along this line. Unknowingly, our fore fathers had made Hong Kong the Radiant City that Le Corbusier had dreamt for Paris. There are pros and cons. We have been able to enjoy the convenience and efficiency of our high density solution. Our mass transit system has made it possible and our country parks are saved from development. In fact, high density development does provide an easier control of energy use and sustainability. We do not have the problem of sprawling suburbia like Los Angeles. Instead, we have a "city of life" full of diversity and vitality. Although at times, we suffer the loss of our heritage and culture. We must strive to maintain our unique way of life for our future.

Under-water Roadwork and Air-right Structures

Mobility is one of the most critical concerns in development and has the greatest influence in the form of our city. In all the proposed reclamation and new development, roadworks occupy the major portion of land use. Because of the noise and pollution generated, the adjacent areas are also wasted. Any new development will have to deal with this problem. Some housing even put bathrooms and kitchens facing the view to avoid the noisy traffic. The alternative is to have less road surface to be used for private cars by improving public transportation. Other innovative considerations include decking the roads for open space and other uses, placing roads underground or even under water. Air right developments, such as the housing over the Tsuen Wan MTR Depot and the Exchange Square in Central, are not unlike that of the New York Expressway Project proposed by Paul Rudolph, all aim at making more economic use of land.

Water as Open Space

One of the more controversial issues is the amount of open space made available in the reclamation proposals. In

many ways, Victoria Harbour is our most important piece of open space. It is a relief for our congested built environment, an asset to all real estate. Why are we filling in the harbour at immense cost only to replace it with open space on land? We have already got the harbour which is our ideal open space. For recreation and leisure, people in Hong Kong prefer indoor spaces. We can always make use of roof terraces as gardens for passive use.

Alternative Developments

It seems that our prediction for the future is not always accurate. The question whether we are over built or whether we have developed in the right location is unclear. In order to avoid reclamation in city centre, the obvious solution is to redistribute the SAR population. At present, about 60% of the population is within the metropolis, others are in the New Territories and outlying islands. If consideration for growth can be more concentrated away from the metropolis, the pressure of development in our centre can be relaxed. This however will lead to more roads and more cars unless we accept the efficient mass transit system which Hong Kong has proven in its success. With the migration of industries to the mainland, we should take advantage of the unoccupied factory buildings and convert them for other usage. We should study the possibility of building on steep slopes instead of relying on created land from expensive site formation. This will allow unbuildable sites such as the quarried areas, a present eye sore, to be put to good use.

Standard Plans

The Hong Kong Planning Standards and Guidelines, used as a land use manual of criteria for determining scale and facilities requirement, are meant to be applied with a degree of flexibility. However, architects and planners often take them as gospel and seldom reevaluate them even when the community at large could get a greater benefit from a different type of development. The present Outline Zoning Plans and Building Regulations allow only a two dimensional view of the city. Much improvement can be made to this mechanism of development control in order to allow for innovative and incentive development. With the current advancement in technology and communications, there will be more home-offices and our life style will change accordingly. Schools may be different all together and perhaps more integrated with the community. We can no longer rely on the existing Government standard housing and school design plans. We do not want the out-dated regulations to hinder our imagination towards a more economic use of land for the 21st century. What we need is more comprehensive studies for development in different areas of Hong Kong, seeking community's participation in order to formulate urban design guidelines that enhance our quality of life and preserve the different characteristics in each district.

Finally, how are we going to improve our environment in order to face the challenges of the next millennium.

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