

Human Habitat and the Environment

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In just over 150 years, Hong Kong went from a fishing village to an aspiring World City of Asia with a population of at least 6.8 million and growing at 1 million every 10 years. Even a hard headed businessman turned governor (with a small G) had to admit that enough was enough and we really must do something about our appalling environment and improve our quality of life.

For too long, our money led government crowed about our GDP per capita; 5th in the world. Nobody wanted to know that if we only looked at the United Nations Human Development Index, which gave a one third rating to each of GDP/capita, longevity and education, we were 21st. No wonder we now need an immediate bandaid for education and then reinvent how we should educate our kids, from parental education to even wholesale reform of some of our third rate universities.

This wholesale questioning of our very fundamentals must be welcomed as we have to cast off 150 years of colonial indoctrination and discover our own values, our Hong Kong values. We will never be entirely British or Chinese, neither could or should we be totally Chinese, we have to be ourselves and find our place in this world in the context of the freedoms and disciplines of the Basic Law.

How we procreate, live, learn, work, play and die will cast our mould for the future. Hence the topic of this talk is very apt at a time when we are questioning all our fundamentals and truly find our way in the world.

The Housing Authority is the largest enterprise in Hong Kong accounting for 3% of its GDP. Over 50% of Hong Kong's population live within its handiwork. Its policies either imprison its tenants or open up new horizons. Some of the most unfortunate ones never leave their room, only to be taken by ambulance to visit their doctors in Government clinics. We have a heavy responsibility indeed.

I have been an Authority member for three years now and much to my regret and absolute shame of the Authority, its heart is not truly green. Even the Chief Executive of the Special Administrative Region has been moved to put the environment at the top of his agenda. Madam Chairman did not respond to my damning address at the Annual meeting but left it to the executive to respond. It is time to dance to another tune.

There are many within the Department who want change, change in the way it provides housing for Hong Kong, but there are still too many who are indifferent. My hope is that with the example of the Chief Executive, we will do better.

Sustainable Housing Development

The Chief Executive set out three points on what he believes is the essence of sustainable development for Hong Kong. They are:

- _ finding ways to increase prosperity and improve the quality of life while reducing overall pollution and waste
- _ meeting our own needs and aspirations without doing damage to the prospects of future generations: and
- _ reducing the environmental burden we put on our neighbours and helping to preserve common resources

I personally believe that both the Chief Executive's three points and more particularly the Brundtland definition are too idealistic and far too difficult even for the experts to grasp and come to a consensus, let alone the public. Even the Chief Executive's three points are too hazy on what is sustainability.

I would narrow it down to two basic points to grasp:-

- (i) what level of technology advancement there will be, and
- (ii) what level of human dignity are we prepared to tolerate?

Technology

We have the technology now to solve all our environmental problems whether it be air, water, waste, noise and smell. Problem is that the available solutions are often rather expensive when viewed from the present cost paid by the public who is generally the polluter and the political cost of forcing that reduction is considered too great. We also need to locate the 'solution' somewhere and the 'not in my backyard - NIMBY' syndrome prevents us from setting it up where the common interest dictate it should be located.

The other problem is that although everyone professes that they support the polluters pay principle, but when it comes to the crunch, many come up with rather disingenuous arguments such as 'because it is our natural bodily function to discharge body wastes, we need not pay'. It is just too convenient to push the burden onto someone impersonal like the taxpayers.

The technology is available to solve our problems but it is the political process that is letting us down. If only we can get all the politicians to agree that the environment should not be politicised, technology would not be a block to sustainable development. Cost benefit analysis should be the way to look at technology.

The century that is about to pass must be termed the 'century of the car'. The car has totally transformed our lives in the way we live and work. If I were to make any predictions, the next century will be that of the computer. It took about 50 years between the invention of the motor car by Daimler until technological improvements made the car popular and really transformed lives. So also the invention of the transistor was almost 50 years ago and it is only in recent years that the computer has been commoditised and really change the way we live.

Information technology promises to transform the way we work and live and it is very difficult to see where it will lead us. Even the scenario story telling gurus have failed to give us any positive leads. It only leaves us with the science fiction writers, but which one do we believe?

Human Dignity

The Median Living Space for public rental housing is 8.8 square metres per person. This is up from 3.5 square metres in 1954 when it all started. In our private sector, specially in the bed space apartments, it is considerably less. Homes for the Elderly have higher standards for which we are barely keeping up. Of course, this includes only the dwelling space. Our public housing now contains sitting out areas and the schools are no longer on the roof tops.

Our safety net, or the Comprehensive Social Security Allowance, is based on the Median Income but it had to be adjusted down for large families because it was felt that the formula was over generous and open to abuse. If dignity is taken to be the criteria, then it must be our top priority to ensure that everybody earns enough to live comfortably and yet be able to save sufficient either through voluntary personal savings or compulsory saving schemes to be able to live with dignity and comfort throughout the ever extending retirement in old age without resorting to handouts such as CSSA.

I regret to say that the 5% + 5% contributions of our Mandatory Provident Fund is only a start and is nowhere near enough. It is therefore imperative that we find ways so that earnings are increased in real terms and enough can be saved during one's working life so that the safety net need not be resorted to.

8.8 square meters and CSSA is not my idea of dignity for retirement let alone during a working life. In the last 10 years, the square meterage for new public rental housing has gone up by 2.6 sq metres or 42%, or about 3.5% compound per year. I would challenge the Authority to develop a program so that the average living space of our total public rental housing stock will increase by at least the same 3.5% per year over the next twenty years inspite of the expected increase in population. That means 17.5 square metres per person.

Council for Sustainable Development

I was very pleased that the Chief Executive took up the idea of the Council for Sustainable Development. I had made a similar proposal to him but do not claim credit since I understood that a number of independent sources went for the same idea.

I await details of the actual Council but I would stress that it must take 'ownership' of the concept of sustainable development and translate that into real strategies and plans for the onward development of Hong Kong. The Council will report direct to the Chief Executive and this will ensure a fair hearing from all Bureau and Department chiefs (I hope that the Finance Bureau and Transport Department will truly listen because the Chief Executive has now given them hearing aids).

The singular failing of all our previous plans put up by the Planning Department was that they remained plans. When something needs to be done, like building a new housing estate, the Housing Department design the buildings and Highways draw up their road plans. It is only later that they meet and clash. This rarely makes for good planning.

I see a reserve role of the Council in that it will take ownership of the master plan and would see right from the start that the housing for one is comprehensively planned with all the needs taken together. It is in reserve in that the Council itself will not be doing the work, others will know that the head has direct access to the Chief Executive and unless a ready and plausible answer is received for his action or inaction, a request will be received from the Chief

Executive for a quiet chat.

The Council will also have a role in resolving the NIMBY problem. Everybody will agree that for our solid wastes, we need incinerators, but nobody, specially the District Board members will want one in their backyard. It is political suicide in this climate. The Council will persuade and cajole. May be it can even proffer sweeteners so that the politicians can justify the location of what is perceived to be a downer for real estate prices in their neighbourhood. ICAC need not be concerned because the Council itself has no power or funds to offer what is really a bribe, it has to persuade a Government Department or Bureau to bid for that money and it will be openly justified.

Sometimes even that may not be enough. Luckily we do not yet have tree-huggers in Hong Kong and I hope that we will never come to such extremes. Certain environmental infrastructure decisions may have to be taken on a territory wide basis after fully taking into account local opinions and the benefit to the common weal.

Research

There has been a woeful dearth of pertinent research by our academics into the relationship between housing and poverty. Some of the blame could be put to the way our Research Grants are allocated in that this is rarely pure academic research. But equally, I am not sure if our academics are really up to it. I have returned from a study visit to Australia where it is commonplace that Social Groups which perform social services also fund research into social problems, debate the results and advocate solutions. We have some in Hong Kong and they tend to be marginalised because of their advocacy of some of the most disadvantaged groups. Our weaknesses or thoughtlessness are exposed. Often they point their fingers at Government. But it is really us, the public that should rally round if there is such a need. Government must of necessity thoroughly review the circumstances and justify the use of public funds to meet what may be a very specialised need or even of a temporary nature.

Think Out of the Box

The Council for Sustainable Development is a step in the right direction but will the Council start to think out of the box? All our existing government officers have to act within the black box of Executive Council decisions and look to incremental change because if it is made slow enough, the public may not notice it and they will get away with it.

We need to think boldly and for the long term. However, we must not forget our heritage and the way we do things. The governing process is definitely becoming more transparent and we need to get all stakeholders involved. This indeed is an opportunity for real leadership to take us all in the right direction.

Now that the Chief Executive has embraced the environment cause, the real crunch will be the selling of that vision to the whole of Hong Kong. The Chief Executive announced in his 6th October address that the Commission on Strategic Development will issue its report at the end of this year. I hope that this would be used as a tool to get a consensus of everyone in Hong Kong. If there are good arguments to expand or change various aspects, so be it. The vision must be a vision shared by all of Hong Kong. The Commission has merely done the hard slog of brain-storming. Now is when true leadership has to be shown to lead us to a vigorous, prosperous and happy Hong Kong.

Mobility

I do not have all the answers. I will have but two points to make. For most of our population and I am speaking about all those living in public rental housing, they have little mobility.

Once they have been allocated a unit, it may as well be in Xinjiang as far as they are concerned. It is somewhere away from their friends, their relatives, where they shop, their work, the doctor they normally see, the schools their kids are used to. It is heart wrenching to move even to a location closer to work.

I feel that there should be a mechanism that allows families to swap their units? Technically, Information Technology will ensure closer matches. More thorny is whether money could change hands, but I would not allow these questions of equity to sideload such a need.

It would give a family the choice of whether being closer to work or to the school is more important. Even more important is the urge for parts of a family to get closer together such as grandparents who are well separated from their offsprings. If the children have grown up and the breadwinner has recently retired, the couple may genuinely want to move out to the New Territories; at present there is no mechanism to achieve these sorts of happiness which is different but very dear to each one.

There also has to be social mobility in housing. When building and pricing public housing, there must be a clear and graduated path for people to move from public rental housing all the way to a private penthouse on the peak.

Small Houses

Lastly, I wish to have my say about the small house policy. It was started with the best of intentions but time and circumstances have left this a total anachronism like bound feet. Like bound feet, they are a sore, a festering sore on the countryside with wall to wall concrete and totally unplannable transport forcing the inhabitants to use private cars. Moreover the sewerage provision is appalling. I hardly need to say that few of the present owners or occupiers are those originally indigenous inhabitants entitled down the male line, many of them are born, work and live in the U.K.

I strongly urge that we bite the bullet and buy out the entrenched rights so that rural land can be put to proper and better use. Somehow we have to stop this profligate use of land because we have to accommodate an anticipated increase of one million additional inhabitants every ten years unless we have a restrictive population policy. That land is just too precious to be used for small houses.

I have challenged the consultants for SUSDEV 21 that as a test for their CASET tool to assist government departments or bureaux to assess impacts on others, they should set it up for the scenario of 'abolition of the small house policy'.

Conclusion

Ladies and Gentlemen. I hope that I have upset a few holy cows today. I challenge the Chairman of the Housing Authority, the Director and the Secretary for Housing, every single Authority Board Member and everyone else who have a stake in good and effective public housing to start thinking out of the box. They must remember that their past decisions have consigned many to their respective boxes out of which they can hardly escape. We owe it to Hong Kong to have a good, convenient and affordable housing system which will not allow those who can afford to pay more to take advantage to the detriment of those who need it more.

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