

The World From The Ground Up: Hong Kong's Victoria Harbour-- Opportunity For An Historic Enhancement

Since its days in the mid-1800's as an early east Asia trading hub for Great Britain, Hong Kong's waterfront and harbor have been the servants of the city's economic aspirations and infra-structure needs. But, following just a few years after Britain's "handover" of the island and neighboring holdings to China, the local Hong Kong government, prodded and pushed by activists, planning and development professionals, the business community, and an adverse court ruling, has undertaken an initial effort aimed at rectifying some of the planning and use imbalances of the past. The government's focal point for this effort is the twenty-nine member, "Harbour Enhancement Committee."

Hong Kong: Political History and Economic Orientation

Understanding the Harbour Enhancement Committee's ("HEC's") role and challenges requires an understanding of the economic orientation of Hong Kong. Hong Kong, at least in its form known today, has a history that dates back only to the First Opium War, between Britain and China from 1840-1842, in which Britain blockaded Canton to force trade concessions and land cessions. Persistent military and diplomatic pressure by Britain led to the cession of Hong Kong to Britain in 1841, and from that point, construction of an outpost of the British Empire began in earnest. The population grew to 25,000 by 1845, and, thanks to the further cession of Kowloon in 1860 resulting from China's defeat in the Second Opium War, the population by 1865 had increased to 122,000.

Additional Hong Kong holdings were obtained by Britain in 1898, pursuant to a ninety-nine year lease. Over time, these "New Territories" were almost impossible to segregate from Hong Kong, and, without them, Hong Kong would have been difficult to defend militarily. Consequently, in 1997, Britain returned all of Hong Kong to China, under an agreement providing that Hong Kong would be treated by China for another fifty years as a "Special Administrative Region." The "SAR" label was intended to ensure some degree of independence and preserve Hong Kong's capitalist economic system. In the words of the former Chinese premier Deng Xiaoping, the handover would result in "one country—two systems."

With Hong Kong's internal politics remaining tied to a government seated elsewhere, Hong Kong's economic status in Asia since the handover has begun facing stiff competition from the region. In general, competing Asian economies have continued to grow, and several countries that may once have been considered too politically unstable to warrant substantial business investment are now targets of multi-billion dollar investment by such international blue-chip companies as Intel. In the industries for which Hong Kong is most known, in

particular the financial realm, the boom in China has led to the rise of Shanghai as a serious competitor to Hong Kong's leadership position in financial services and international banking.

Against this backdrop, the land use planning tenor of Hong Kong has been to emphasize economic growth and to provide for its needs. The waterfront is an example of these priorities: seventeen different government agencies have sign-off roles on waterfront development, but primarily they each review submittals merely for compliance with their narrow scope of concern, and no centralized planning authority has existed to temper and guide public and private projects.

And for its own economic growth, the Hong Kong government has one of the most valuable assets of all, the ability to reap tax revenues from fifty-year land leases and development rights. That ability nets the government as much as forty percent of its annual revenues. Consequently, over time, the landfill and reclamation projects conducted or approved by the government have shrunk the width of Victoria Harbor—from Hong Kong island to the shores of mainland Kowloon—from a distance of around 7,500 feet down to approximately 3,000 feet, a loss of more than three-quarters of a mile. Up until recently, the harbor itself had become desperately polluted; waterfront access even for something as simple as dining had become non-existent; and discussion of future construction along the water focused more often than not on erecting further infrastructure barriers such as causeways and private projects that would wall off the waterfront.

Reclamation and the Formation of the Harbourfront Enhancement Committee

Enter Winston Chu and Christine Loh.

Winston Chu, a Hong Kong native, a graduate of University College London, and a lecturer at the University of Hong Kong law school, chaired the Hong Kong Town Planning Board in the mid-1990's. In 1994, he founded the Society for the Preservation of the Harbour, commonly known as "SPH," and from that stage, he worked for the enactment of the Protection of the Harbour Ordinance.

His partner in this endeavor was Christine Loh, an extremely successful businesswoman and environmentalist, who at the time was serving in the Legislative Council. She introduced the Ordinance in 1996, and by 1997 it had been passed. A short piece of legislation, it contained one powerful provision, section 3(1), which provides simply as follows: "The harbour is to be protected and preserved as a special public asset and a natural heritage of Hong Kong people, and for that purpose there shall be a presumption against reclamation in the harbour." Suddenly, Victoria Harbor was more than a commercial body of

water, and its waterfront was more than a movable boundary waiting to be turned into development sites.

The Ordinance's brevity, however, left for another day many of the details of its application. That day came on January 9, 2004, when the Court of Final Appeal ruled that the Town Planning Board must revisit a recently-approved zoning plan that called for harbor reclamation, and articulated the "overriding public need" test, to wit, that the presumption contained in the Protection of the Harbour Ordinance could only be rebutted by establishing an overriding public need for reclamation. The court explained that "overriding" meant "compelling," "public" had to include consideration of the environmental and social needs of the community, and there must not be a reasonable alternative to reclamation.

The court's ruling put teeth into the ordinance. Just months later, in May, 2004, the Harbour-Front Enhancement Committee was established to advise the Hong Kong Secretary for Housing, Planning and Lands on the planning, land uses and development along the existing and new harbor-front of Hong Kong's Victoria Harbour.

The Harbour-Front Enhancement Committee

The Harbour-Front Enhancement Committee ("HEC") is made up of twenty-nine members, six of whom are referred to as "Official Members," or representatives of government departments and agencies, and the balance of whom, referred to as "Unofficial Members," are business people, representatives of community groups, architecture and development professionals, and planning consultants.

They have been meeting not quite every other month, and have delegated specific planning issues to sub-committees. Agendas and reports can be found on-line at the HEC web page. The process has included community "town hall" meetings, eliciting input in a manner that most California development professionals would recognize. Initially chartered for a two-year term to end in April, 2006, the committee was extended to June 30, 2007, and then again recently from September 1, 2007 to August 31, 2009. A draft report of proposed development guidelines was issued just before the June 2007 expiration, and its discussion cited harbor examples world-wide (even favorably discussing Baltimore's significant harbor renovation of the early 1980's and since) and introduced, with illustrations, the concepts of view corridors, light and air considerations, and stepped-development.

But not everyone agrees that what has gone on so far is a guarantee of HEC's lasting impact, and perhaps with good reason. The government members of HEC are the very people whose policies are being criticized by the public input, and their past decision-making independence has given them little training, and

perhaps even less incentive, to consider the critiques and proposals of outsiders. Even if some offices of government support the mission of HEC, apparently not all feel the need to defer to HEC's impending proposals or de facto interim role as mediators of harbour-front planning issues: during the last twelve months alone, the bureaucracy has authorized the demolition of two historical waterfront icons, the Star Ferry Pier and the Queen's Pier, and announced in very authoritative terms the planned construction of a two-story causeway right along a prime section of downtown Hong Kong's waterfront (akin to the San Francisco Embarcadero freeway that partially collapsed and was subsequently torn down; extreme community pressure intervened and the causeway may be re-routed underground). Even all but the most grass-roots representatives on HEC may be having a hard time with credibility in the community: the Hong Kong daily newspaper, the South China Morning Post, printed a letter that ignored HEC's accomplishments to date and instead complained about noise caused by HEC members landing at a heliport which services the HEC meetings.

The credibility of HEC is damaged by the government in other ways. The latest extension of HEC's charter was not announced until late June, just days before the June 30 expiration date. HEC has had few of its own, unrestricted financial resources with which to solicit input from worldwide professionals. HEC, by its own "Modus Operandi" protocols, does not issue press releases or hold press conferences; consequently, very little about HEC appears in the press. And government officials have no qualms about speaking out publicly on topics under consideration by HEC, such as the remark this last August (while HEC was between sessions) by an un-named Development Bureau spokeswoman that there would never be a central harbor authority, as a permanent successor to HEC. HEC members were quick to respond that the government's conclusion was pre-mature, as the issue was certainly on the future agenda of the group but had not yet been brought up for consideration, and the governmental pre-emption of committee discussions must be discouraging to the volunteers serving on the committee.

Other Groups Join In The Conversation

Perhaps because of the several-year run-up from the adoption of the Protection of the Harbor Ordinance to when HEC first was empanelled, or perhaps because other cities have recently been so successful with major harbor renovations, the examination of Victoria Harbor's future has attracted the involvement of bodies other than just HEC.

Christine Loh, mentioned earlier, has joined with several other prominent planners and activists to form DesigningHongKong. To illustrate the waterfront possibilities, DesigningHongKong has sponsored an International Urban Planning & Design Competition to solicit design concepts for the Central

Waterfront of Hong Kong. Consistent with the government's own publicly-stated design objectives as well as the tenor of the public positions of Ms. Loh and of her most outspoken partner at Designing, Paul Zimmerman, the competition asks participants to "embrace" the design principles of "creation of vibrancy and diversity," "enjoyable public spaces," and the "creation of a green unifying edge to the Harbour and Central Business District." The four finalists can be viewed online at the organization's web page. Mr. Zimmerman has asked to meet in person with HEC once their new term is underway, to present the competition's results and share some of the key issues that have emerged from the submittals.

Another group that has thrown itself into the fray is the Harbour Business Forum ("HBF"). This group boasts a broad business membership, and believes that good planning concerning harbor and harbor-front development issues is important from a business perspective. Stating on their web page that the waterfront is "uninspiring and sterile," HBF has contributed by providing the resources to host presentations in Hong Kong by worldwide leaders in waterfront development and planning issues. With titles like, "Victoria Harbor: Hong Kong's front yard or junk yard?," speakers have critiqued the present status of the harbor, while others have spoken on waterfront planning experiences in other cities, such as San Francisco, Toronto, Singapore, and Venice, to name a few.

Also participating, at least early on (particularly as their North Asia office is located in Hong Kong), the Urban Land Institute has contributed to the exchange of ideas with two publications, a report entitled, "Waterfront Revitalization- A Global Perspective," and a second, more substantial undertaking, entitled, "Hong Kong Harbour: A Strategy for Regeneration." Their recommendations addressed not only design issues, but political ones as well, and favored the establishment of a harbor design and planning "czar." As noted earlier, the issue of who or how the legacy of HEC will be carried forward is one that all corners recognize as important to address, even if the government already has tipped its hand in opposition.

Going Forward

Where this leads is not entirely easy to predict. Two conversations are taking place, whether they are spoken or unspoken. The first conversation seems to be over whether a planning process grounded in community consensus—even just consensus among the public and private planning and development professionals—is needed and even valid. The second conversation is, assuming an affirmative conclusion in the first conversation, then what does the planning process look like and what ought to be the results? It may be that the hope of the community, as represented by some of the community appointees to HEC, DesigningHongKong and maybe even HBF, is that if HEC (and the drumbeat of the HBF presentations) can last long enough, and if the results of the

DesigningHongKong design competition can be compelling enough, then an otherwise self-reliant city bureaucracy will have little choice but to concede that the planning process must open up to the public. Once that happens, there may be differences of opinion as to planning and design, but at least those differences are more likely to share a common framework of values and idioms, as the entire community—including the public servants—truly hear one another.

Links and Resources:

Harbour Enhancement Committee:

<http://www.harbourfront.org.hk/eng/index/index.html?s=1>

DesigningHongKong:

<http://www.designinghongkong.com/>

Harbour Business Forum:

<http://www.harbourbusinessforum.com/>

and for fascinating timeline with photos and map showing progress of reclamation: <http://www.harbourbusinessforum.com/hkharbour.aspx?lang=en-US>

Urban Land Institute Hong Kong resources:

<http://www.uli.org/Content/NavigationMenu/DiscoverULI/WorldwideReach/>

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