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RESHAPING HONG KONG

Dimensions of change in a compact city

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The growth and development of Hong Kong has, from its colonial inception, reflected a process of constant transformation and adaptation. This personifies a number of factors that broadly relate to the prevailing administrative and economic policies that have themselves been formulated in response to continuing development pressure. In its transition from colonial city to a Special Administrative Region of China, Hong Kong now sits at the southern end of a development corridor encompassing the Pearl River Delta Region, with nine cities in Guangdong Province including Guangzhou as its northern hub. China's 12th Five-Year Plan puts great emphasis on transforming this region's development into one of the world's most important economic and trading centres. As Hong Kong looks forward to new opportunities and challenges, this chapter reflects on the some of the early influences that have shaped the city, and identifies emerging forces that are reshaping its urban identity.

Early development and legislation

In 1841, when Hong Kong Island was ceded to the British in perpetuity under the Treaty of Nanking, few places around the southern China coast seemed more inhospitable to building. Along the northern foreshore of Hong Kong Island the hillsides fell steeply to the deep-water harbour, prohibiting major development, while the flat Kowloon peninsula was virtually devoid of building apart from several small coastal settlements. The new city on Hong Kong Island was named Victoria in 1843, and covered Sheung Wan, Central and Wan Chai alongside the harbour. Central District became the political and economic base, with new Chinese immigrants settling in Sheung Wan further to the west. By 1847 the population had reached about 24,000 people and the beginning of a 'Central' infrastructure was in place.

The first comprehensive piece of legislation that introduced controls over development in Hong Kong was the Public Health and Buildings Ordinance of 1903. Part III of the Ordinance had particularly ramifications for planning: minimum specifications for private streets; building heights; number of storeys; the right to regulate building types; and the means of plan submissions to the Building Authority. It was complemented by the Crown Lands Resumption Ordinance in 1900, which set out procedures for the resumption of land or buildings for public purposes, with compensation. Much early development was associated with reclamations, carried out as and when required, with virtually no collaboration between government and property interests. The evolution of the city of Victoria into the central business district followed on from the old trading house and prominent public building tradition in the area. This established the growth of the banking and financial services industry, fuelled some twenty years later through rapid industrialization and urbanization, when tall blocks began to permeate the grid-like street patterns originally laid out for low-rise offices and warehouses.

In 1935 new legislation effectively split the Public Health and Buildings Ordinance. The new Buildings Ordinance allowed structures up to five storeys, while reducing the minimum accommodation standards. That same year a Housing Commission reported that there was a shortage of up to 35,000 flats caused by immigration from China, and that living space in older areas tended to be subdivided between several households, defeating the Ordinance's objectives of minimum occupation standards.

Thus at the outbreak of the Second World War and the Japanese occupation in 1941, the planned development framework had started to be put in place, although residential building and living conditions were very poor. A quarter of a million people lived on the streets, in boats or in squatter settlements on hillsides and rooftops. Immediately after the Second World War, the population expanded from 600,000 people in 1945 to 2.36 million in 1950 as a result of civil war in China. The old housing stock had been severely depleted by war damage. Squatting became virtually the only option, not just for new immigrants, but for long-term residents who had lost their homes.

In 1946 the government appointed British planner Sir Patrick Abercrombie to prepare the first comprehensive plan for the urban area, covering the city of Victoria and Kowloon, and allowing for 'revision from time to time in the light of changing requirements and technical accomplishments'.[1] However planning priorities were unexpectedly redirected in 1953, after fire at the Shek Kip Mei squatter settlement in Kowloon made 53,000 people homeless. It led directly to major government involvement in public housing through the establishment of the resettlement programme, aimed to re-house squatters and use the cleared land for development purposes, including new housing estates. This became the basis for the new Resettlement Department established in 1954, equipped with financial backing from Government.

Impact of the housing ordinance and changes to the buildings ordinance

The second major legislation passed in 1954 was the Housing Ordinance, which established a Housing Authority to provide low-income accommodation. It was also granted powers to develop land and carry out improvement of acquired older buildings. With the population increasing to 2.5 million in 1954, the Town Planning Ordinance that year directed that plans should be prepared for a number of areas outside the urban area. So began the official commencement of the New Territories Development Programme.

The maximum building height limited to under five storeys by the 1935 Buildings Ordinance was radically overhauled in 1955 to permit a greater land-use intensity. Simultaneously, the Landlord and Tenant Ordinance was also amended so that building owners could compensate tenants and apply for redevelopment to realize their site's full potential. The 1956 Building (Planning) Regulations of the amended Buildings Ordinance allowed much greater plot ratio potential in urban areas, and because a building's height was related to street width in the ratio of 2:1, it was possible in certain areas to redevelop a site with a plot ratio (gross floor area) of up to twenty times the site area. This instigated the redevelopment of low-rise blocks into 'high-rise' tenements[2] whose economic ramifications in turn led to a transformation of the urban area by 'mansion' blocks of more than twenty storeys.

New regulations were brought into force in 1965. These provided a sliding scale of plot ratios and site coverage, related to building height and type, which are still largely applicable. The maximum plot ratio for domestic properties was set at 10:1 and for non-domestic properties at 15:1. Ground coverage was set at 66.6 per cent for domestic and 100 per cent for non-domestic uses. Open space integration depended on the class of site, and gross floor area could be increased in return for a donation of public open space or as a result of road widening. Speculative blocks continued to comply only with minimum regulations throughout the 1960s, until new regulations enforced greater building standards and, through leases, limited building uses.

The ten-year housing programme announced in 1973 aimed at building 30,000 housing units a year, aiming for the complete clearance of squatters by 1983. However high immigration volumes from the mainland – amounting to around 60,000 persons per annum between 1979 and 1981 – led to the expansion of older squatter settlements and the growth of new ones. The estimated 580,000 squatters in Hong Kong still represented less than half the demographic estimated to be inadequately housed. The majority of the remainder lived in old private tenements and in the early Mark I and II housing estates that provided only a very basic standard of accommodation.

Prior to the mid-1980s, when resources were mainly directed at the public housing programme and new town development, public-sector involvement in urban renewal was minimal, and mainly directed at small projects and squatter

clearance. At the same time the private sector undertook large-scale redevelopment of outdated utility installations generally owned by the development companies themselves – for example the Tai Koo Shing Dockyards in North Point, the Whampoa Dockyards in Hung Hom, and the waterfront power station sites in North Point and Aberdeen. This created large-scale private residential estates in prominent sites around the harbour.

Transformation of Hong Kong into a high-rise city

Hong Kong is associated with hyper-density development but only 17 per cent of its land is actually built on. Whilst this theoretically allows easy access to open space and enables country parks to be protected from development, the result is that buildable land has been made to represent a scarce commodity and therefore an expensive one. The combination of land-use zoning and plot ratio conditions, together with the inherent flexibility in the planning system has propelled the urban land market on the basis that 'ideal' patterns of land utilization must equate with the activity that generates the greatest return.

Castells et al have argued that because virtually all land in Hong Kong was only leased to development interests, and because private interests have been well represented on the government's own decision-making bodies, decisions regarding development have always been made to the mutual advantage of both parties.[3] The high financial return to government from land sales has been exacerbated by two other factors: first, the premium extracted by government through up-zoning of permitted land use to enable more valuable high-density development; and second, the mortgage policy of banks in extending favourable conditions to purchasers of new property, thereby encouraging a constant flow of new and redeveloped high-rise buildings.[4] Squatter clearance, together with the re-housing of large numbers in high-density estates, has also acted to free up valuable urban land for new development.

Hong Kong's gradual transformation into a high-density city therefore needs to be seen not only in terms of the constant pressure on scarce land area, but on the workings of a sophisticated financial model to which land-use zoning and land mechanisms have contributed significantly. The result has been an increasingly undifferentiated city form. Hyper-density in new and redeveloped areas, zoned predominantly for one purpose, is insufficiently equated with the positive aspects of a diverse mix of uses that would cultivate greater urban character. Succeeding generations of buildings in the densely urbanized part of the city, therefore, reflect a changing regulatory framework, ever-increasing land values and fragmented ownership, and have been invariably reinterpreted in a largely ad hoc way, according to the environmental footsteps and constraints of their predecessors. However the multi-ownership and multi-occupation of older tenements has led to their effective withdrawal from normal market operations.

Residential distribution and characteristics

The first housing programme in the early 1970s had related housing demand to minimum accommodation and affordability standards. However by 1980 housing demand and supply had begun to reflect a shift towards a greater consideration of the dynamics of the housing market. Under the 1987 Long Term Housing Strategy, the Housing Authority was reorganized with a large degree of autonomy, with the objective of increasing homeownership through public provision rather than through the private sector. Until today, approximately 2.1 million people, or around 29.7 per cent of the population, have been accommodated in public rental housing, while a further 1.2 million people, or around 17.8 per cent of the population, live in subsidized-sale flats.[5]

The built-up area per person in Hong Kong (excluding large areas of open space, harbours, airports etc.) is only around 28 square metres per person.[6] This compares with 25 square metres per person in Mumbai (the lowest); 35 in Shanghai; 145 in Beijing; and 257 in New York.[7] In addition, Hong Kong accommodates around two-thirds of its population within a 10 kilometre radius of its urban core, which is abnormally high and greatly exceeds that of other metropolitan areas with a much greater amount of built up land per capita. This level of population density close to the urban centre has been economically beneficial to Hong Kong and has contributed to a strong sense of urbanity through its traditional land-use mix. But the accelerated redevelopment process has also changed the inherent nature of the inner urban districts, largely in response to Hong Kong's transition to a service economy over the past fifteen years, and the older inner districts now contain a mix of commercial and residential development.

Government intervention in the housing market

Today, the Hong Kong government effectively controls both land supply and housing in several ways. First, it controls the land sales programme and can regulate the land allocated for housing; second, it controls land use through zoning, and changes of use through lease modification; third, it controls the public housing programme under the auspices of the Long Term Housing Strategy; and fourth, the right to resume land for public purposes.[8] This puts government firmly in the driving seat in terms of the supply of new housing. The full-blown public housing programme, established hand-in-hand with the new town programme, has become a key aspect of Hong Kong's current policy. The programme has helped maintain a social equilibrium, and has contributed towards Hong Kong's continued economic success, not simply by artificially subsidizing the labour market, but effectively preserving a socially stable community.

In 2010, Hong Kong housing stock was 2.534 million units, with 1.401 million in private ownership.[9] While there is no housing under-provision in actual unit numbers, there is a significant imbalance in terms of size and distribution. The average size of a private apartment is still below 50 square metres.

The shortfall is therefore in quality and environmental standards rather than supply. New development areas are laid out as an assemblage of estates, each relatively 'self-contained' in terms of markets, schools and other community facilities. However while open space standards are much higher than within the urban area, the public realm of streets and urban places is generally poorly articulated.

The term 'new town' covers a variety of situations, but these are essentially similar in their design solutions. It represents either expansions of existing market towns such as Tai Po, Fanling and Yuen Long, or reclamations of shallow estuaries and bays, together with existing foreshore and flatter valley areas such as Sha Tin, Tuen Mun and Tseung Kwan O. But proactive investment in highways and rail transport have, in effect, led to an equitable balance between metro and non-metro areas, with new town densities generally below those of the urban area. In recent years, however, their overall densities have been increased to meet housing programme dictates. Their built form representation is very different from traditional city developments, being intensely urban but with reasonably high standards of open space, recreation and amenity areas, befitting the strongly residential nature of these new communities. Their character has also been determined as much by single-use zoning and an overly standardized approach to building design, making them essentially functionally workable environments, although the urban structures themselves embody little capacity for change or incremental adjustments in response to evolving economic circumstances. There is therefore an established community life but without the vitality or district-specific identity that is a traditional characteristic of Hong Kong's urban areas. However the social success of these new towns, the commensurate reduction in urban area residential densities and the ongoing redevelopment of older public housing estates within the metro area have enabled remodelling of parts of the city through urban renewal.

Reshaping the urban identity

While it is difficult to recognize a semblance of 'completeness' in Hong Kong's city building process, its population has perhaps for the first time since the Second World War reached a situation of equilibrium. However, dilapidated older housing stock still remains technically inadequate, and urban renewal and land-use planning have historically circumvented the need to realistically address the needs of older communities in terms of social, economic and physical processes. Older buildings, whatever their quality, are rarely derelict; they are simply run down. They do not represent wider levels of deprivation but rather interface directly with pockets of new development and economic activity, one type of use often benefiting from the other.

Thus there exist different but overlapping urban vocabularies that have as much to do with perceptual, temporal and social aspects as visual and physical ones. Hong Kong's fundamental urban component is its street configuration and lot pattern. Successive redevelopment, some helped by changes to the Buildings

Ordinance, have rationalized this pattern through remodelling the physical fabric. Perhaps this reflects the unstable nature of contemporary Asian urbanism – between chaotic disorder and monolithic regimentation. As the city is transformed by a new spatial imagery, this duality is manifested in condensed activity cores related to transit stations and interchanges with a layered fusion of shopping, commercial and residential uses, which at a more questionable level can also produce privatized enclaves removed from the empirical reality of the urban realm.

The vertical use stratification, each with their associated activity and movement channels, underlines the essential difference between the formal framework of western public spaces and the more diffused and informal realm of Hong Kong's high density, compact city. Here the relationship between 'public' and 'private' is less tangible, and the routes between work are just as effectively in three dimensions as in two. The result is an urbanism of edges and interfaces, where urban space results from constant reinvention and complexity. Change and impermanence underlie the essential design language, while new and different values are superimposed on long-established patterns, extending the city's cultural reach (Figures 20.1–20.3).

The 'global web' of cities is altering local economic and social practices in Hong Kong. While routine production jobs are being relocated to the Pearl River Delta, Hong Kong itself is competing with other emerging regional economic centres for port, logistics and other related business. New road and rail infrastructure currently being implemented will eventually create a web of high-speed connections with other cities within the delta. The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region government is also cooperating with Guangdong Province on a Regional Cooperation Plan in five areas: environment and ecology; low-carbon development; culture and social aspects; spatial planning and transport planning. The planning horizon extends up to 2020 in line with the Plan for the Reform and Development of the Pearl River Delta Region. To cater for this, new arrangements will be needed so that planning and economic measures are proactive and directed towards city betterment issues: regenerating older areas as opposed to massive redevelopment; harbour-front improvement to open up almost 80 kilometres of land around the central harbour for public recreation and enjoyment; and bottom-up rather than top-down urban renewal.

The Pearl River Delta – reinforced through China's 12th Five-Year Plan – continues to grow and change as the major technopole in southern China, and this is creating a new impetus for the environmental upgrading of traditional and cosmopolitan areas of city-space in Hong Kong. In translating the vision and recommendation of Hong Kong's Commission on Strategic Development into a spatial planning context, one of the main objectives will be to ensure that development is carried out with regard to the environmental carrying capacity of the region. At the same time, Hong Kong's hub functions will need to be enhanced by strengthening the city's role as a global financial, business and

FIGURE 20.1 Hong Kong's urban structure is based on a hierarchical network of streets where compositional organization is secondary to the vertical stacking of uses (drawing by author)

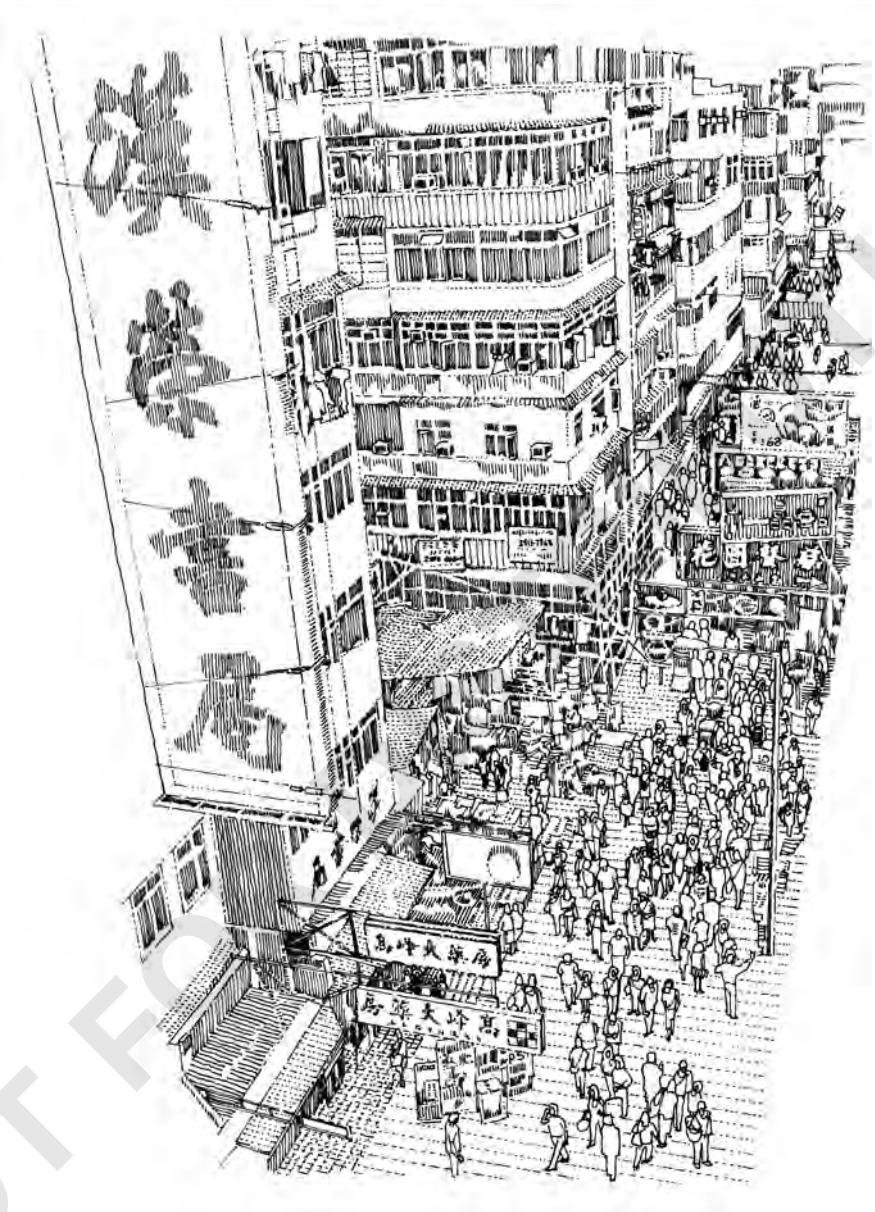

FIGURE 20.2 Change and impermanence dominate the street design, with new and different values superimposed on long-established patterns, extending the city's cultural reach (drawing by author)

FIGURE 20.3 Hong Kong's streets diffuse a narrative of layers that facilitate a robust street–building edge, with its rich and constantly changing sequences of activity (drawing by author)

logistics centre, and developed further as an innovation and technology centre for southern China.

Notes

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Further reading

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