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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/5071>

DOI: 10.4000/chinaperspectives.5071

ISSN: 1996-4617

Publisher

Centre d'étude français sur la Chine contemporaine

Printed version

Date of publication: 21 April 2010

ISSN: 2070-3449

Electronic reference

Nicolas Douay, « The Emergence of a Collaborative Approach Challenges Hong Kong’s Urban Planning Model », *China Perspectives* [Online], 2010/1 | 2010, Online since 01 April 2013, connection on 10 December 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/5071> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/chinaperspectives.5071>

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The Emergence of a Collaborative Approach Challenges Hong Kong's Urban Planning Model

NICOLAS DOUAY

Urban planning in Hong Kong is being transformed with the expansion of civil society and the development of various community movements. They are posing a challenge to current urban planning practices and throwing up conditions for a collaborative approach to urban planning, fashioning alternative strategies.

Hong Kong has undergone profound changes in recent decades.⁽¹⁾ In the political sphere, the former British colony was handed over to China in 1997 under Deng Xiaoping's "one country, two systems" formula. In the economic sphere, ever since China's reform and opening of the late 1970s and more so since the handover, Hong Kong has become increasingly linked to its hinterland in the Pearl River Delta, with which it is trying to build a megaregion of 40 million inhabitants. Hong Kong's claim to be a world city depends on a coalition of actors from the government and the business lobby developing urban policies purporting to foster economic competitiveness.

However, Hong Kong's urban planning is being transformed with the emergence of civil society,⁽²⁾ and of several community-based movements challenging the policies preferred by the coalition that dominates planning forums. This article aims to study the extent and nature of, as well as the alternatives emerging from, this challenge, examining the possibility of a turn towards a collaborative approach to urban planning, incorporating alternative strategies.

In order to do so, this article will consider the reasons for the formation of a coalition favouring the growth and then the development of external and internal resistance to it, seeking to formulate new alternatives. The concluding portion will dwell on the significance of such evolutions with regard to the paradigmatic change towards the collaborative approach to sustainable urban planning and development in Hong Kong politics.

The growth coalition of government and private actors

Incomplete democratic mechanisms

Hong Kong, which became a British colony in 1841, was handed back to Chinese sovereignty in 1997, but remains set apart from the rest of the People's Republic. Its mini-constitution, the Basic Law, governs the political setup characterised by the "one country, two systems" principle. It allows the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR) to keep its judicial and political systems, its currency and immigration laws intact until 2047, i.e., for 50 years after the transfer of sovereignty.

The SAR's ruling executive council is headed by a Chief Executive enjoying a five-year term in office. Tung Chee-hwa held the post between 1997 and 2005. He was replaced by Donald Tsang, who had headed the civil service and had previously held senior posts in the colonial administration. The government is made up of 14 ministers answering to the Chief Executive. The Legislative Council, which

1. Louis Augustin-Jean, Florence Padovani (eds.), *Hong Kong Économie, société, culture*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2007; *China Perspectives*, Special Feature: Hong Kong, Ten Years Later, no. 2, 2007, Hong Kong, CEFC, 2007; *The China Review*, Special Issue: Hong Kong: Ten Years after the Handover, vol. 8, no. 1, 2008; Ming K. Chan (ed.), *China's Hong Kong Transformed, Retrospect and Prospects Beyond the First Decade*, Hong Kong, City University of Hong Kong Press, 2008.
2. Civil society may be defined on the one hand as a group of concerned citizens in a given territory and on the other hand as a group of organisations representing them (trade unions, employers organisations, non-government organisations, professional associations, voluntary bodies, religious communities, local forums...).

adopts laws but has no control over the executive, is made up of 60 members, half of them elected by popular vote in geographical constituencies and the others chosen through sectoral functional constituencies.⁽³⁾

Thus, while Hong Kong aspires to be a “world city”⁽⁴⁾ like New York or Tokyo, it differs greatly from those competitors. It still lacks real universal suffrage, which some regard as an obstacle to attaining global city status. There has been much debate on this issue, and on 29 December 2007, the Chinese authorities announced that the Chief Executive would be elected through universal suffrage in 2017 and the legislature in 2020.

A coalition between the political elite and businesses

At the outset it may be noted that Hong Kong’s territory is characterised by its small size and the extent of natural landscape dominated by hills and slopes. Just 20 percent of the territory is built up, and more than 38 percent is protected by the Country Parks Ordinance. There are two main forms of habitation in Hong Kong: high density areas around Victoria Harbour and newly developed areas on the one hand, and low density villages and semi-urban areas on the other. Another distinguishing feature of Hong Kong is the mode of ownership and management of land area. The government owns all the land, with the exception of the plot on which St John’s Cathedral stands, and grants leases for certain periods of time. This puts Hong Kong’s government in a crucial situation, giving it more powers than enjoyed in Western countries. The city often held up as highly liberal paradoxically thus reveals a rather more interventionist side.⁽⁵⁾ The government can easily influence the general use to which plots of land are put by, for instance, favouring major interest groups under the control of tycoons, especially when it is fiscally opportune for the authorities.

The theory of urban regimes,⁽⁶⁾ or that of growth coalitions,⁽⁷⁾ helps clarify this situation through the idea that municipal governance is often characterised by an arrangement between public and private actors pursuing economic growth. Citing Atlanta, in the US state of Georgia, Clarence Stone noted the early formation of a biracial coalition between a small economic interest group in the central business district and representatives of the black community. This coalition helped maintain racial tolerance and formulate highly effective and innovative urban policies for economic development.

Among the various approaches with regard to local authorities, the urban regime theory considers them to represent a

process of social production rather than of social control. Thus, contrary to the debates pitting pluralists against elitists over the question “who governs?”, this theory is more concerned with the means needed to put in place a capacity for action. It is therefore about a universe in which the authorities are seen as constituting an action agent rather than an instrument of domination.

According to the urban regime approach, the actors and institutions are implicated in a complex system. In this context, the state can find it difficult to be an agent of authority and control, the government acting more as a resource mobiliser and coordinator. To be effective, governments have to ally with a number of non-governmental actors: “In responding to social change and conflict, governmental and non-governmental actors are encouraged to form regimes to facilitate action and empower themselves.”⁽⁸⁾ In concrete terms, a regime is defined thus: “An informal yet relatively stable group with access to institutional resources that enable it to have a sustained role in making governing decisions. Participants are likely to have an institutional base; that is, they are likely to have a domain of command power. The regime, however, is formed as an informal basis for coordination and without an all encompassing structure of command.”⁽⁹⁾

In Asia, Singapore offers the prime example of a phenomenon in which state interests are mixed up with those of the ruling party and its leaders. The urban regime in place generates impressive economic growth (there is talk of “Singapore, Inc.”) that facilitates many paternalistic policies, especially the major public housing programmes. Hong Kong’s situation is quite similar,⁽¹⁰⁾ with the government’s centrality being in effect the basis for the constitution of this urban regime. It owns all the land and has the means to act strate-

3. Christine Loh and Civic Exchange (ed.), *Functional Constituencies: A Unique Feature of the Hong Kong Legislative Council*, Hong Kong University Press, 2006.
4. Saskia Sassen, *Global City. New York, London, Tokyo*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1991.
5. Louis Augustin-Jean, “Aménagement du territoire et développement: ‘(non)-intervention positive’ ou libéralisme?” (Land management and development: “positive (non)-intervention” or liberalism), in Louis Augustin-Jean and Florence Padovani (eds.), *Hong Kong Économie, société, culture*, Paris, L’Harmattan, 2007, pp. 167-196.
6. Clarence Stone, *Regime Politics: Governing Atlanta (1946-1988)*, Lawrence, Kansas University Press, 1989.
7. Harvey Molotch, “The City as a Growth Machine: Toward a Political Economy of Place,” *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 82, no. 2, 1976, pp. 309-332.
8. Gerry Stocker, “Regime Theory and Urban Politics,” in David Judge, Gerry Stocker, and Harold Wolman (eds.), *Theories of Urban Politics*, London, Sage Publications, 1995, pp. 54-71, p. 58.
9. *Ibid*, pp. 58-59.
10. Mee Kam Ng, “From Government to Governance? Politics of Planning in the First Decade of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region,” in *Planning Theory and Practice*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2008, pp. 165-185.

gically in regulating the economy and society. The business lobby, symbolised by tycoons who dominate the major property groups and control massive resources, constitutes the other facet of this coalition. Hong Kong's originality lies in the system of socio-professional constituencies that give the business lobby a much greater weight than envisaged in Stone's theory: "Whereas in other countries, business lobbies try to buy the support of politicians, usually through large campaign contributions, in Hong Kong, the situation is reversed. The government is put in the peculiar position of having to stay in the good graces of the business lobbies, or risk losing valuable political support."⁽¹¹⁾ These two actors thus have different but complementary resources and interests. They depend on the same system based on trust rather than authority or hierarchy. Contrary to the theoretical model based on Western experiences, Hong Kong's civil society, trade unions, and other citizen groups are still largely excluded from this dynamic, due as much to the institutional and political context as to the nature of the compromise adopted in the urban regime. The business lobby therefore wants to keep its dominant position. Some tycoons even have seats on the legislature and benefit from direct access to decision-making. They want to preserve that by applying breaks on any evolution towards democratisation universal suffrage: "Thus now we see wealthy businessmen and women in LegCo arguing that they provide a counterweight to irresponsible popular politics, that Hong Kong is not ready for democracy, and that what is best for the economy and the public is only coincidentally what is best for themselves."⁽¹²⁾ This urban regime resembles a growth coalition and defends a municipal development model favouring regional economic competitiveness. These city planning choices are aimed at projecting Hong Kong as a "world city."⁽¹³⁾ In fact, ever since China adopted economic reforms in the late 1970s, Hong Kong's economic base has shifted from being an Asian Tiger along with Taiwan, Singapore, and South Korea. Hong Kong has moved its industrial sector out into the Pearl River Delta, especially to Shenzhen, where the tycoons control part of the action, and has largely replaced it with a services sector mainly based on finance. This evolution in the economic base implies a change in the city's occupation modes. The need for industrial areas often situated on the periphery gave way to a large extent to the demand for other types of space, mostly for offices. This evolution added to the tradition of land reclamation around Victoria Harbour,⁽¹⁴⁾ both on Hong Kong Island around the Central district and on the Kowloon side, especially the area that for many decades housed the Kai Tak Airport, the fate of

which is now the subject of much debate. This tradition of reclamation boosts the interests of the government, which sees in it the opportunity to carve out new high-value space to boost its coffers. This collusion between political and economic elites underpins Hong Kong's planning system.

Bureaucratic planning in favour of economic competitiveness

In terms of public policy making, urban planning forms part of a traditional mode of intervention. But the absence of universal suffrage reinforces the executive's – and the administration's – omnipresence. This rests on a strong bureaucracy, which in the normal course would tend to practice a rational mode of planning. Traditional urban planning is founded on the value of scientific knowledge and expertise, especially of associated information (statistical or cartographic). The rational model aims to serve public interest.⁽¹⁵⁾ In fact, this model is dominated by a spatial approach with the objective of regulating land use and urban growth through zoning and stipulating building densities, and through ensuring infrastructure addition.

British colonial tradition and now the practices of the SAR authorities leave little room for public consultation or participation in decision-making. Strategies are worked out in great secrecy and decisions are arrived at rapidly, often without debate: "The legal system has legitimized a set of planning and development processes that deny citizens a right to participate and confines decision-making power to a privileged few at the apex of the power structure."⁽¹⁶⁾ The organisation of Hong Kong's government follows a traditional model grafted onto a rational period. On the ladder of participation,⁽¹⁷⁾ ranging from manipulation to co-decision via information and partnership, Hong Kong languishes at the lower rungs. Besides, the Transport and Housing Bureau has more clout than the Environment Bureau, and so policy-

11. Jake van der Kamp *et al.*, "Non-positive interventionism: How functional constituencies distort the free market," in Christine Loh and Civic Exchange (ed.), *Functional Constituencies: A Unique Feature of the Hong Kong Legislative Council*, Hong Kong, Hong Kong University Press, 2006, p. 290.
12. *Ibid.*, 291.
13. Mee Kam Ng, "World-city formation Under an executive-led government: The politics of Harbour reclamation in Hong Kong," in *Town Planning Review*, Special issue on planning Asian world cities in an age of globalisation, vol. 77, no. 3, 2006, pp. 311-337.
14. Mee Kam Ng *et al.*, "Reclamation: An urban development strategy under fire," in *Land Use Policy*, vol. 14, no. 1, pp. 5-23, 1997.
15. Martin M. Meyerson *et al.*, *Politics, Planning and the Public Interest: The Case of Public Housing in Chicago*, New York, Free Press, 1955.
16. Mee Kam Ng, 2008, p. 170.
17. Sherry R. Arnstein, "A Ladder of Citizen Participation," in *Journal of American Institute of Planners*, vol. 34, no. 4, 1969, pp. 216-224.

Wan Chai Market in 2008

Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Wan_Chai_Market_Outside_View_2008.jpg

making tends to favour economic development at the cost of sustainable urban growth, even though since 2007 a “Development Bureau” has emerged following an administrative overhaul. After 2001, the Urban Renewal Authority (URA) replaced the Land Development Corporation and has generally been the official arm handling different policies towards the oldest urbanised neighbourhoods. In this regard, Hong Kong’s situation once again resembles that of Singapore, where the Urban Redevelopment Authority is at the heart of public policies.

With globalisation rendering economic and entrepreneurial activity more volatile,⁽¹⁸⁾ the growth coalition’s favoured urban policies rest on enhancing economic attractiveness in order to promote Hong Kong’s competitive edge over other cities. In this perspective, building strategies of cities tend to imitate each other,⁽¹⁹⁾ leading to expansion of business districts offering office towers, conference and exhibition centres, high speed train stations, or quick connections to the international airport. Hong Kong’s International Finance Centre (IFC) is typical of this evolution, having enlisted star architect Cesar Pelli for its imposing second tower. This marks the urban landscape to the point of turning it into city branding. Needless to say, it focuses on superior tertiary activities; the trade centre hosts top brands and the most luxurious services, and enjoys proximity to a transport hub with a quick hop to the airport. Meanwhile, housing has also been transformed to offer high-class luxury to expatriates or well-heeled locals who wish to enjoy the same benefits.

Finally, in urban planning, two forms of rationality compete in Hong Kong: on the one side, a coalition of political and economic elites favouring economic competitiveness based on a rational planning approach; and on the other an emerging civil society challenging this urban development model and proposing instead a shift towards a community-based and sustainable model taking a collaborative approach to planning. These two sides confront each other in an often explicit manner through fierce controversies such as over the process of reclamation in Wan Chai district.

External challenge through residents’ mobilisation and experiment with community approaches to planning: The Wan Chai example

Wan Chai as catalyst for local awakening

The Wan Chai Market was built in 1937 in line with contemporary architectural rules (often linked to the Bauhaus



New Wan Chai Market

Source: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:HK_WanChaiMarket.jpg

style, but specialists reject this reference). The building is steeped in history: during the wartime Japanese occupation, it was used to store corpses.

The market was renovated in 1961, and in the late 1990s talk emerged of a new round of modernisation. The Execu-

18. Allen Scott, *Global City-Regions: Trends, Theory, Policy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001; Michael Storper, *The Regional World: Territorial Development in a Global Economy*, New-York, The Guilford Press, 1997; Pierre Veltz, *Mondialisation, Villes et Territoires. L'économie d'archipel* (Globalisation, Cities and Territories. Archipelagic Economy), Paris, Presses universitaires de France, 1996.
19. Nicolas Douay *et al.*, “Glamour planning ou les villes à l'ère de la compétition” (Glamour planning or cities in the competition era), in Nicolas Buchoud, *Villes stratégiques: Changer l'urbanisme pour répondre aux défis urbains mondiaux* (Strategic cities: Changing urban planning to meet global urban challenges), Lyon, Éditions du CERTU, 2008, pp. 145-153.



Wedding Card Street before demolition

Source: http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/90/Lee_Tung_Street.jpg



Banners on Lee Tung Street

Source: <http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/fa/DSCN1975.JPG>

tive Council authorised the Land Development Corporation to purchase several plots in Wan Chai to undertake urban renewal. A consortium was formed (Chinese Estates 40 per cent, Kwong Sang Hong 25 per cent, Chi Cheung Investment 20 per cent, and Peregrine Group 15 per cent).

In 1996, Chinese Estates, controlled by billionaire Joseph Lau Luen-hung, teamed up with the URA to redevelop the site and build a luxury residential and commercial complex in a good illustration of the collusion within the coalition of public and private actors seeking to use policies in favour of modernisation. The first phase included a new market that incorporates more modern standards and luxurious space but is also more anodyne.

The second phase, envisaging the demolition of the old market, was unveiled after Hong Kong's handover and at a time when civil society was asserting itself.⁽²⁰⁾ After 1997, Hong Kongers began to reappropriate cultural elements from the colonial period and developed an interest in intangible heritage exemplifying their daily life.⁽²¹⁾ Artists, architects, and designers, who were conscious of the architectural significance of the old market building, were the first to protest. After their action, and at a time when redevelopment projects were proliferating in Wan Chai, local residents began to mobilise. A coalition urged the government to offer a new site to the building consortium. Urban planning officials initially refused to consider any such move, but in 2007 the government and the URA announced that the building's facade would be retained and that part of the old market would be put to commercial use to accommodate shopkeepers ousted from Wedding Card Street.

The market controversy raised residents' awareness, and they began to mobilise against the development model the government was imposing via the URA, which had unveiled numerous redevelopment projects in Wan Chai, especially around Johnston Road. Of course, the area was run down and located close to business hubs, with attendant economic pressure to develop and transform it, as well as to raise the standards of local residents.



Lee Tung Street today

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20. Jean-Philippe Béja, "Is Hong Kong Developing a Democratic Political Culture?" in *China Perspectives*, no. 2, 2007, Hong Kong, CEFC, pp. 4-13; Christine Loh, "Alive and well but frustrated: Hong Kong's civil society," in *China Perspectives*, no. 2, 2007, Hong Kong, CEFC, pp. 40-45.
21. Sebastian Veg, "Cultural heritage in Hong Kong, the rise of activism and the contradictions of identity," in *China Perspectives*, no. 2, 2007, Hong Kong, CEFC, pp. 46-48.

Demolition of “Wedding Card Street” sensitises Hong Kongers

The Lee Tung and McGregor Street redevelopment project gave a new dimension to civic mobilisation. Lee Tung, known as “Wedding Card Street,” is part of Hong Kong’s heritage. For at least four decades, thousands of couples flocked there to buy wedding and birthday paraphernalia, calendars, or even visiting cards.

In 2003, the URA announced it would spend HK\$3.58 billion to redevelop this 8,900 square-metre area, the largest and most expensive project it had ever undertaken. Local residents and Hong Kongers generally reacted with a mass mobilisation reminiscent of that following the demolition of two structures in the Central district – Queen’s Pier and the Star Ferry Pier. Activists protested the attack on what was not so much architectural heritage as an intangible heritage and historic tradition expressed in the form of specific use of space. Protests multiplied over three years with different types of actions, including hunger strikes. Once the street was divested of its shopkeepers, numerous banners went up offering interesting images to the media and creating quite a buzz surrounding its history in the years 2006 to 2008.

From protests to empowerment of local residents

Those in charge of community development⁽²²⁾ in the area denounced the destruction of old buildings as well as the community networks linked to them with the disappearance of many public spaces, especially outdoor markets. Subsequently, they decided to join a project aimed at conserving such links. In a four-storey block known as the Blue House, a symbol of Wan Chai’s heritage, a “community museum” was opened in January 2007 with a twin objective: “On the one hand, we aim to preserve and propagate the cultural essence of Wanchai through exhibitions, cultural tours, workshops and other activities; on the other, we hope to encourage local participation in deciding the future of the district and cultivate a sense of belonging and cultural identification.”⁽²³⁾ Exhibitions have periodically been held, drawing nearly 2,000 visitors a month for various activities.

Activities to learn more about the area were organised to help residents reclaim it. Events displaying originality, such as “community tourism,” were introduced for residents traditionally excluded from discussions on urban planning. Residents acted as guides to help explore Wan Chai.

These were often housewives, who found a means of empowerment in such activities.⁽²⁴⁾

Such empowerment may be defined as “the process by which an individual or group acquires the means to strengthen the ability for emancipation.”⁽²⁵⁾ These forms of empowerment are different from the North American or European experience, because in Hong Kong it is not about the exhaustion of a Keynesian type of regulation model but rather reflects the intrinsically asymmetric nature of exchanges between the business-friendly government and civil society. The main argument to justify this process is the ruling coalition’s inability to address the Wan Chai area’s real problems and issues. Thus the aim is to put new constraints on the dominant actors so as to question their legitimacy and thereby take part in strengthening civil society. Beyond the issues linked to urban redevelopment, such actions aim to sustain the transition towards an emancipation of the tools and practices of Hong Kong’s democracy.

Such mobilisation and empowerment by residents was also carried out within urban planning forums. In November 2008, a group of students and teachers from the department of urban planning at the University of Hong Kong organised the “Wan Chai Community Planning Workshop” with a view to promoting collaborative planning: “Regenerating Wan Chai through Community Planning.” Of course, the real impact of such actions is open to question. The vastly unequal resources of the two sides, and the conflict of forms and extent of legitimacy highlight the marginal nature of change.

“Wedding Card Street” symbolises Hong Kong’s loss of heritage

Soon the controversy went beyond Wan Chai and mobilised a large number of Hong Kongers who deemed it a symbol of the perverse effects of the development strategy pursued by the government with the construction industry’s backing. The media focus on Lee Tung Street inspired a song by Kay Tse, which met with great success, winning many prizes in 2008 including song of the year. The words and the video

22. St. James’ Settlement.

23. Wanchai Livelihood Museum: <http://cds.sev227.001at.com/WLM/about.html>, (last visited 18 March 2009).

24. Bernard Jouve, “L’empowerment: entre mythe et réalités, entre espoir et désenchantement” (Empowerment, between myth and reality, hope and disenchantment), in *Géographie, Économie, Société*, vol. 8, 2006, Lavoisier, pp. 5-15.

25. Marie-Hélène Bacqué, “L’intraduisible notion d’empowerment vue au fil des politiques urbaines américaines” (The untranslatable notion of empowerment as seen in American urban policies), in *Territoires*, no. 460, 2005, pp. 32-35.

The first part of the song "Wedding Card Street" 囍帖街 by Kay Tse (謝安琪):

忘掉種過的花
重新的出發
放棄理想吧
別再看
塵封的喜帖
你正在要搬家
築得起
人應該接受
都有日倒下
其實沒有一種安穩快樂
永遠也不差

Forget the flowers that you planted
Set off with a new start
Abandon your dream
Don't look at your dust-covered wedding card anymore
As you are moving your house now
You have to accept what you have built will be destroyed at last
After all, no happiness and stability can forever last

就似這一區
曾經稱得上美滿甲天下
但霎眼
全街的單位
快要住滿烏鴉
好景不會每日常在
天梯不可只往上爬
愛的人沒有一生一世嗎
大概不需要害怕

Look at this area
It used to be known for its beauty
But all of a sudden
All shops were gone in the street
Left are only the crows
Good life will not last for ever
Heavenly ladder will not go upwards only
Love cannot live for eternity
So you don't need to be afraid

(忘掉愛過的他)
當初的喜帖金箔印著那位他
裱起婚紗照那道牆
及一切美麗舊年華
明日同步拆下
(忘掉有過的家)
小餐檯梳化雪櫃及兩份紅茶
溫馨的光景不過借出
夠期拿回嗎
等不到下一代
是嗎

(Forget the one you loved)
Whose name is printed in gold on the wedding card
Forget also the wall you hanged the wedding photo on
And all the old beautiful memories
As they'll be all gone with the demolition
(Forget the family you had)
The little dining table, the couch, the fridge and the two cups of red tea
The happy moments are merely borrowed
Isn't it time to get them back?
Can we wait until the next generation?
Can we?

• Translated by Suki Chung

clip served as a clear indication of Hong Kongers' attachment to the area and their sadness over the destruction of material and intangible heritage.

The Lee Tung Street episode touched the hearts of the public, who saw in it an attack on their way of life. It added to the voices raised against the URA's urban redevelopment approach. But the criticism was not quite in the NIMBY (not in my back yard) mould, but rather targeted the process and content of policy-making. Modernisation at any cost stood challenged, and other approaches to urban renewal were proposed:

There is a lack of appreciation by the URA concerning the value of ordinary buildings. A group of ordinary buildings can create an extraordinary urban environment. This is particularly true when the group of buildings also share common activities. Such urban environments gradually evolve and become part of our urban culture. This is the case of Wan Chai Lee Tung Street, known as "Wedding Card Street," Mong Kok Sai Yee Street or "Sneaker Street" and the "Ladies Street." For example most of the buildings surrounding "Sneaker Street" and "Ladies

Reclaimed areas

Reclaimed sites in grey and those under reclamation in red.

Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Hong_Kong_reclamation.png



Street” are also of no particular heritage value. If we adopt the URA’s approach, all these building have to be demolished and replaced with new one. In the future, what would be the traces of Hong Kong ordinary buildings? Should the urban environment of Hong Kong evolve without respecting and valuing the unique urban culture as assembled by these ordinary buildings?

Urban modernisation has always been the main factor in the demise of our urban culture. It should be pointed out to the URA and Ms. Tang that redevelopment is not the same as modernisation.⁽²⁶⁾

The URA’s methods, and the criticism they generated, were reminiscent of the controversy over former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s inner cities policy. The British government, through the Urban Development Corporation, gave private promoters the task of revitalising dilapidated areas but with hardly a word to local residents: “Armed with decision-making powers and huge funding, the UDC transformed the areas targeted with contrasting results. When the area concerned held great potential, such as the entirely redeveloped London Dockyard, it was a success for the promoters, who filled it with office blocks and standing residences. But it was a mixed bag, as it meant the departure of the poor people who lived there and who had to move with no benefit.”⁽²⁷⁾

Finally, Wan Chai symbolises a challenge, external and from the ground, of the dominant coalition and its urban development model favouring modernisation and competitiveness. The controversy over the central waterfront exemplified a different kind of opposition to this model, but it came from within the coalition itself.

An internal challenge from a section of the business community: The Central Waterfront experience

Conflicting dimensions of capitalisation and development of the waterfront

The development of the waterfront has followed Hong Kong’s historic tradition of reclamation.⁽²⁸⁾

The project also exemplifies a recurrent theme in urban planning. The transition to a post-Fordist economy has led to re-viewing the use of harbourside areas that had undergone urbanisation or major industrialisation. In North America, there

are the examples of Boston or Montreal, in Europe there is Barcelona or London, and in Asia there is Singapore with its famous Marina Bay, or even Manila with its current project: The Central Business Waterfront Park.⁽²⁹⁾

With Hong Kong’s transformation into a financial centre, the development of central areas has been sped up. In 1989, the government proposed the Central and Wan Chai Reclamation project. Reclamation projects have always attracted polemics, but in 1996 it became more controversial. The Society for Protection of the Harbour (SPH), formed a year earlier, launched the “Save Our Harbour” campaign, collecting 170,000 signatures. The same year, the SPH forced the government to withdraw its plan to reclaim 190 hectares around Green Island and to put forward a legislative bill to protect the harbour. With 95 percent support from Hong Kongers,⁽³⁰⁾ the bill was passed into law. It deems the harbour “a special public asset and a natural heritage of Hong Kong.” The SPH has played a major role in the mobilisation and structuring of civil society response to such projects, and it has attracted support from several other organisations.⁽³¹⁾ In October 2003, the “Citizen Envisioning @ Harbour” (CE@H) coalition was created to demand greater participation in decision-making with regard to urban development. The coalition used the main tools of collaborative approach, organising exhibitions, roundtables with residents, and public demonstrations. A Harbour Business Forum (HBF) was set up, attracting business people (111 members) to champion a “dynamic, accessible, and sustainable” vision of the waterfront.

In response to these actions, the government in 2004 set up the “Harbourfront Enhancement Committee” (HEC), inviting representatives from CE@H and HBF. The HEC helped signal to the government the need for greater openness in the planning process. The novelty lay in the partici-

26. Architect and designer Bee Hai Chun’s blog: <http://beehaichun.wordpress.com/2007/12/13/wedding-card-street-iv/> (Last visited 18 March 2009).

27. Jacques Donzelot *et al.*, “Démocratie et participation: l’exemple de la rénovation urbaine,” *Esprit*, no. 326, 2006, p. 30.

28. Ho Pui-Yin, *Challenges for an Evolving City, 160 Years of Port and Land Development in Hong Kong*, Hong Kong, The Commercial Press, 2004.

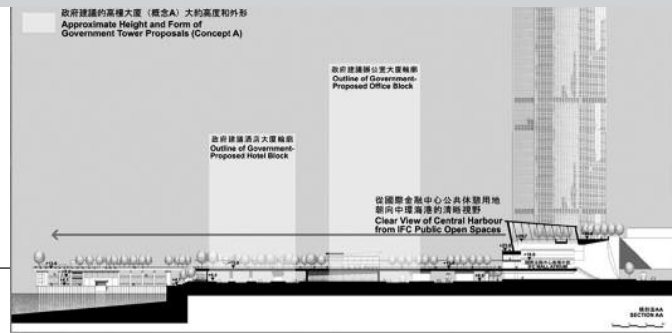
29. Deborah Erwin, “Sustainable Shores,” in *RFP Magazine*, no. 51, March 2009, pp. 22-25.

30. In April 1997, according to SPH.

31. Ng, 2008.

Sectional view of tower projects in front of the IFC

Source: Central Waterfront Project Management Company Limited



pation of a section of the business community that began to challenge the pro-growth coalition by promoting a more balanced vision of development. Thus, contrary to the Wan Chai experience, protests sprang not only from outside but also from within the ruling coalition's constituency.

Controversy over Central Waterfront construction facing the IFC

Since 2008, debate has focused on the construction of new towers facing the IFC complex,⁽³²⁾ which consists of two towers, the taller one 88 storeys high, and a shopping mall. The government proposed building a 30-storey block as well as another of 18 storeys.

IFC representatives denounced the erection of a structure blocking their view of the harbour and forming a wall around the promenade. They insisted on the need to review the project so that the waterfront can be "returned to the people."⁽³³⁾ The IFC asked a group of architects and urban planners to design an alternative plan offering 9,600 square metres of public space. It included restaurants, cafes, and bars highlighting plentiful public space linking the waterfront and the business centre, in particular a large fountain that could be converted to host group events.

The IFC representatives sought to stress community engagement: "We're doing this for the public benefit." Like the actions mounted by CE@H, they used collaborative methods relying on communication and interaction. In fact, they noted at the outset that their model stemmed from planners who had spent the major part of their time talking and interacting: "This talk is a form of practical, communicative action."⁽³⁴⁾ From this perspective, dialogue and other forms of communication could influence actors and situations: "Planners are deeply engaged in a web of communicative and interactive activities that influence public and private actions in direct and indirect ways."⁽³⁵⁾ The IFC lobby held an exhibition of the competing scenarios of development. Young activists explained the various panels and models and asked visitors to sign a petition, which gained some 22,000 signatures in the first two months of 2009.

Of course, the obstruction of part of the view the IFC commands could slash the tower's property value. There was also talk that some owners who controlled parts of the New Territories did not want to see any new buildings in the city centre so as to preserve the value of their holdings. While this stand coincides with that favouring more sustainable and collaborative planning, it also exposes the hidden face of the actors (public, private, or community) involved in the com-



View of projects in front of IFC

Source: Central Waterfront Project Management Company Limited

plex power relations, who hide behind grand slogans in order to defend their narrow interests.

In response to the IFC's stand, the dominant coalition let it be known, through the government, that the proposed new buildings would not block IFC's view, and that after all it was the march of history, the IFC having itself blocked the view of several older towers: "The two blocks are much shorter than the IFC, how can they block views? (...) The IFC doesn't allow people to block its view but it itself has done this for a long time."⁽³⁶⁾ Further, the coalition stressed the need to offer new office space to sustain economic growth and deal with the current crisis.

32. A joint-venture of Sun Hung Kai Properties, Henderson Land Development, and Hong Kong and China Gas.
33. Patrick Sit Pak-wing (owners' representative), cited by Joyce Ng, "IFC owner opposes plan for neighbours," in *South China Morning Post*, 24 February 2009.
34. Judith E. Innes, "Information in Communicative Planning," *Journal of the American Planning Association*, vol. 64, no. 1, 1998, p. 52.
35. Innes, 1998, p. 52.
36. Cho-Nam Ng cited by Joyce Ng, "IFC owner opposes plan for neighbours," *South China Morning Post*, 24 February 2009.

The debate continues, with both sides sticking to their positions, but as with previous episodes, the government could be forced to make a concession. It did so in 2008, when the project size was slashed by 25 percent. Hong Kongers care about the waterfront, just as they did about Lee Tung Street. Many argue for an alternative vision of redevelopment:

“The government need to find ways to make our city self-develop in a sustainable manner, continuous reclamation and adding buildings here and there is not the solution. We want a waterfront for all, not for the developers.”⁽³⁷⁾

From challenges to the dominant coalition, to a new approach to planning?

The experiences with Wan Chai and the Central waterfront followed similar controversies over the former HMS Tamar site and the West Kowloon Cultural District, showing that voices denouncing the two dominant actors in planning have been rising. But to what extent can the emergence and strengthening of civil society define this system?

Emerging civil society

Since the 1980s, Hong Kong's civil society has been emerging and growing in strength. The handover was followed by the Asian financial crisis and the SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) epidemic. The old social contract, under which Hong Kongers stayed out of political debates until the economy picked up, was challenged.

In July 2003, the government sought to push through a law on subversion (envisaged under Article 23 of Hong Kong's Basic Law), but civil society (dormant since 1989) burst forth with a mammoth rally of more than 500,000 people, who voiced their fears for freedom of the press, of religion, and of association. The proposed law was dropped after the loss of majority support from legislators. This led to top-level departures, including that of Tung Chee-hwa on 10 March 2005, albeit 20 months after the public protest. His successor, Donald Tsang, signalled a change of attitude. Having served in the colonial regime and as Chief Secretary, Tsang was the best-placed civil servant to take over the helm. He enjoyed some popularity among the city's residents, who thought he was more capable than Tung of implementing political reforms and also ensuring prosperity.

Thus the first post-handover decade saw a strengthening of civil society: “Following July 1, Hong Kong has seen consecutive social movements to demand universal suffrage, defend its core values, and preserve its natural and historical heritage (Victoria Harbour, Star Ferry and Queen's Pier, to name the notable themes). These are not sporadic campaigns; they articulate a common desire, particularly amongst the younger post-1980s generation, to search for Hong Kong's identity and worth from colonial past.”⁽³⁸⁾

Civil society: New actor in the coalition?

Civil society may have grown in strength and vitality, but it has not emerged as a full player within the Hong Kong urban planning regime, and is still dismissed as “vibrant but loosely organized.”⁽³⁹⁾ The planning regime remains a partnership in which the government and the business lobby are complicit and complement each other. Civil society's inclusion in this coalition could upset the very nature of the urban planning regime, which explains why such an eventuality would be problematic. A stronger civil society could boost the influence of pro-democracy parties in the SAR. Moreover, with interests and values divorced from those of the dominant actors, civil society could in fact transform the planning style with a more collaborative and community-based approach, and also a content that pays attention to sustainable development and no longer orients public policies towards the city's attractiveness and economic competitiveness.

Collaborative turn in the context of an unfinished democratic transition

The issue of a move towards a collaborative approach has been subject to theoretical debates of urban planning for two decades now.⁽⁴⁰⁾ Building a consensus through improved interaction between different actors could help ameliorate urban strategies, it is thought: “In the ideal of collaborative planning, stakeholders representing the differing interests meet for face-to-face dialogue and collectively work out a strategy to address a shared problem. Participants work through joint fact finding

37. Architect and designer Bee Hai Chun's blog, *op. cit.*

38. Anthony Cheung, “Hong Kong's Role in Transforming China,” in Ming K. Chan (ed.), *China's Hong Kong Transformed, Retrospect and Prospects Beyond the First Decade*, Hong Kong, City University of Hong Kong Press, 2008, p. xiii.

39. Hoi Wai Chua et al., *The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region: A Vibrant but Loosely Organized Civil Society, CIVICUS Civil Society Index Report for the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, PRC*, Hong Kong, 2006.

40. Patsy Healy, *Collaborative Planning: Shaping Places In Fragmented Societies*, Vancouver, UBC Press, 1997.

Main actors in Hong Kong's urban planning

	Interests	Values and aims	Resources
Government	Augmenting fiscal resources and maintaining its authority	Developing Hong Kong into a World City	Control of property regime and law-making as well as link to business lobby
Business lobby	Profit from property development	Capitalism and development of Hong Kong's competitiveness	Capital funds and link to government officials
Civil society	Influencing the process and content of planning	Respect for residents' rights and community-based, sustainable growth	Mobilisation capacity

and agree on a problem, mission and actions. The players learn and co-evolve. Under the right conditions, this dialogue can produce results that are more than the sum of the parts.”⁽⁴¹⁾ This vision has gripped Western societies and has emerged in sharp relief in emerging or newly developed economies⁽⁴²⁾ such as Hong Kong, as it highlights the difficulties faced in effecting such a change as well as the need to achieve democratic transition in order to make a success of the process. Hooshang Amirahmadi and David Gladstone⁽⁴³⁾ have come up with a theory of possible ways in which civil society may emerge in newly developed countries. They stress three possible stages:

- The first, strong development with a dominant state and weak civil society;
- The second, in which civil society asserts itself and confronts the state;
- The third, with two possibilities: development paralysis through the domination of the state or civil society or more sustainable development, or a balance between the two.

In this perspective, a further hypothesis may be proffered: Hong Kong entering a transition period in which civil society asserts itself but fails to join the urban regime coalition. In addition to the development debate, Hong Kong's current situation also concerns its post-colonial identity: “This postcolonial (re)turn is actually more a recolonization than a decolonization of the capitalist Cantonese city by the mainland

Mandarin master.”⁽⁴⁴⁾ The political and institutional situation has led some researchers, such as Mee Kam Ng, to focus their work on the possibility of such a development although political reforms are still under discussion.⁽⁴⁵⁾ High-profile actors and groups such as Christine Loh and her think tank, Civic Exchange, also acknowledge the need to achieve a democratic transition in order to secure for civil society a place in the sun: “Civil society does not only act as a watchdog of the government and business, it is also a partner in governance. The blossoming of civil society in Hong Kong is ironically a result of an extremely awkward political system, and most of the time, civil society in Hong Kong is pitched

41. Judith E. Innes *et al.*, “Planning Styles in Conflict, The Metropolitan Transportation Commission,” *Journal of the American Planning Association*, vol. 71, no. 2, 2005, p. 183.

42. Li-Ling Huang, “Urban Politics and Spatial Development: The Emergence of a Participatory Planning,” in Reginald Yin-Wang Kwok, *Globalizing Taipei The Political Economy of Spatial Development*, pp. 78-98, New York, Routledge, 2005; Tingwei Zhang, “Developing the Chinese Planning Theory – Planning Theory in the Age of Diversity, ACSP – AESOP,” conference paper, Chicago, 2008; Daniel B. Abramson, “Urban Planning in China, Continuity and Change,” *Journal of American Planning Association*, vol. 72, no. 2, 2006, pp. 197-215; John Friedmann, *China's Urban Transition*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2005; Nicolas Douay, “Shanghai: Urban Planning Styles in Evolution: Emergence of a ‘Harmonious Urbanisation’?” in *China Perspectives*, no. 4, 2008, Hong Kong, CEFC, pp. 16-25.

43. Hooshang Amirahmadi and David Gladstone, “Towards a dynamic theory of the state and civil society in the development process,” in *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, vol. 16, 1996, pp. 15-25.

44. Howard Y.F. Choy, “Schizophrenic Hong Kong: Postcolonial Identity Crisis in the *Infernal Affairs* Trilogy,” *Journal of Global Cultural Studies Transtext(els) Transcultures*, no. 3, 2007, *Global Cities*, p. 53.

45. Mee Kam Ng, *op cit.*, 2008; Yu-Hung Hong, “Communicative Planning in an Undemocratic Society: Hong Kong Case,” in Ashok K. Dutt *et al.*, *The GeoJournal Library, Challenges to Asian Urbanization in the 21st Century*, vol. 75, 2003, pp. 83-101.

against the régime. (...) This will not change unless the disarticulated nature of the political system is reformed.”⁽⁴⁶⁾

Expanding the network of actors in order to change urban planning

Such an evolution echoes the very sense of planning, defined as a “societal process of political coordination among the territory’s network of actors.”⁽⁴⁷⁾ Implementation of urban strategies thus implies the mobilisation of all public actors – private as well as civil society – to adopt a common vision articulating their resources and their legitimate interests. Now the success of such integration lies in the link between the planning process and the common values identified or acknowledged by different actors.⁽⁴⁸⁾ This raises the question of Hong Kong’s “institutional strength” and thus of its ability to generate interaction and coordination mechanisms for the actors so as to bring to bear resources and legitimate interests around common objectives.

This challenge concerns the aims of the collaborative approach, raising questions especially of the political leadership.⁽⁴⁹⁾ Western experiences show that the state often has a key role in the collaboration process in order to initiate or nurture progress.⁽⁵⁰⁾

The political leadership has to assume the role of a dynamic agent creating new relationships among various actors. It has to display “institutional creativity” to fashion (formal or informal) negotiation forums: more than mere institutional tools, there is a need to foster a governance culture to end the status quo and release creative forces of political economic and social actors.⁽⁵¹⁾

In Hong Kong, the government-business coalition has faced internal challenges (as over the waterfront) and external ones (in Wan Chai) that tend to lead to new forms of regulation. These innovations, however, adhere to the path of dependence.⁽⁵²⁾

The local system’s persistence and inertia indicate a robotic learning process. Thus any expansion of the coalition of actors and movement towards sustainable urban planning will have difficulty shaking off the logic of the Hong Kong power structure. That Hong Kong is far from the theoretical model of collaborative planning may be linked to the main challenges to this approach, especially those from the paradigm of communicative action of Jürgen Habermas.⁽⁵³⁾ These analyses recommend observing “the dark side of planning theory”⁽⁵⁴⁾ to note the importance of power relations deliberately neglected in literature based on communicative rationality.

The role of planners in this transition

I will conclude with a word about the role of planners in this transition. Planning theories often stress ethical considerations

and the need for urban planners to have a reflexive attitude towards their practices,⁽⁵⁵⁾ even being pro-active in favour of social change. In order to encourage collaboration, in order to achieve a new balance of power among the state, the business lobby, and civil society – while the dominant actors command much bigger resources – they have to support social change through empowerment of civil society. Patsy Healy stresses that in the planning process, they should be “involved in the discussion, design, and management of specific actions, grasping the fine grain of the interactive dynamics of situational specifics and broader dynamics.”⁽⁵⁶⁾ Such support from planners should help all actors adopt a collaborative attitude and overcome opposition, while ensuring that civil society avoids the easy way out of knee-jerk opposition or resistance.

Hong Kong planners have been adopting this kind of proactive conduct. This was seen in the case of the “Urban Design Alliance” grouping the Hong Kong Institute of Architects and the Hong Kong Institute of Planners with the ambition to “promote the design and building of a better Hong Kong.” They stress the need to develop high-density urban planning, and in the case of the waterfront controversy, suggest solutions that could be a compromise between different actors now opposing each other.⁽⁵⁷⁾

The expansion of the coalition of actors and the evolution of urban strategies favouring a more collaborative and sustain-

46. Yan-yan Yip *et al.*, “New Generation, Greening Politics and Growing Civil Society,” in Ming K. Chan (ed.), *China’s Hong Kong Transformed, Retrospect and Prospects Beyond the First Decade*, Hong Kong, City University of Hong Kong Press, 2008, p. 227.

47. Alain Motte, *La notion de planification stratégique spatialisée* (The notion of spatial strategic planning), La Défense, Ministère de l’Équipement (PUCA), 2006, p. 44.

48. Alain Motte (ed.), *Les agglomérations françaises face aux défis métropolitains* (French towns facing challenge from metropolises), Paris, Economica, 2007, p. 256.

49. Andy Smith *et al.* (ed.), *Le leadership politique et le territoire, les cadres d’analyse en débat* (Political leadership and the territory: analytical framework in debate), Rennes, Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2003.

50. Judith Innes, “Planning through Consensus Building: A New View of the Comprehensive Planning Ideal,” *Journal of the American Planning Association*, vol. 62, no. 4, 1996, pp. 460-472.

51. Motte, *op. cit.*, 2006.

52. Paul Pierson, “When Effect Becomes Cause: Policy Feedback and Political Change,” in *World Politics*, no. 45, 1993, pp. 595-628.

53. Jürgen Habermas, *The theory of communicative action: Reason and the rationalization of society*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1984; Jürgen Habermas, *The theory of communicative action: Lifeworld and System: A critique of functionalist Reason*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1987.

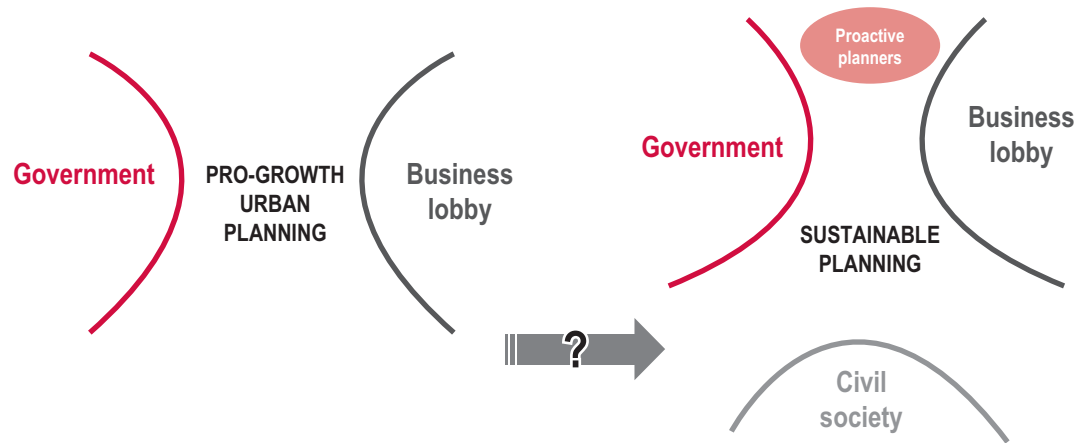
54. Neil Harris, “Collaborative Planning: From Theoretical Foundations to Practice Forms,” in Philip Allmendinger *et al.* (ed.), *Planning Futures: New Directions for Planning Theory*, London, Routledge, 2002, p. 30.

55. John Forester, *The Deliberative Practitioner: Encouraging Participatory Planning Processes*, Cambridge, The MIT Press, 1999.

56. Patsy Healey, “Collaborative Planning in Perspective,” *Planning Theory*, vol 2, no. 2, 2003, p. 116.

57. Erwin, *op. cit.*, 2009.

Hypothesis of a shift to sustainable urban planning, following a rise in the number of actors



able approach involves complex processes, as they imply an evolution for each actor in the planning system: a public sphere achieving its democratic transition, a private one becoming more ecologically and socially responsible, and better organised civil society. The government's administrative reorganisation with the creation of a Development Bureau, and especially the economic crisis of 2008, might have helped unleash this transformation and the evolution of

strategies towards urban policies. Hong Kong is not the only Asian metropolis facing difficulties with regard to a change towards collaborative and sustainable approaches. Singapore and Taiwan confront the same imperatives, and it is possible that some time in the future, major mainland Chinese metropolises could also tread this path. •

• Translated by N. Jayaram