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# Narrating the Mall City

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In her discussion of Hong Kong's mall culture, Janet Ng notes that Hong Kong's omnipresent shopping malls are not only vessels of capitalist development, but also local places where people are acculturated in everyday life.<sup>1</sup> This can be seen, for example, in many literary works that focus on the construction of memories around various objects and spaces of consumption, memories that elicit strong sentiments amongst those who shared these experiences.<sup>2</sup> These kinds of narratives have become more pronounced in recent years, with the growing nostalgia of "old Hong Kong" coming to encompass some of the older shopping malls that are under threat of demolition or significant makeover in order to attract tourists and multinational retail chains<sup>3</sup> (FIG.1). This situation has prompted widespread criticisms of the profit-making mentality of landlords and developers on the one hand, and the failure of the government to protect the interests of Hong Kong citizens and local businesses on the other.

The mourning for the loss of older shopping malls and local retailers has rapidly transformed these places of consumerism – many of which once charged for having destroyed the older urban fabrics themselves – into "symbols of community" worthy of protection. This situation offers a new twist on the familiar critique of consumerist culture for segregating individuals from community life.<sup>4</sup> Although resistance against urban renewal projects also tends to solidify collective action elsewhere, the narratives surrounding Hong Kong's shopping malls and their associated "cherished local way of life" also underscore the specificity of histories and spatial practices. What then, are the historical processes that shaped the relations between the residents

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<sup>1</sup> Janet Ng, *Paradigm City: Space, Culture and Capitalism in Hong Kong* (New York: Sunny Press, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Ng, *Paradigm City*, 95-96.

<sup>3</sup> The phenomena can be observed in many recent articles in Hong Kong's local Chinese newspapers. For an example showing the nostalgic sentiment about the city's old shopping malls, see 陳裕匡, "我與瓊華中心一起成長," *House News*, 12 February 2013.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion on Hong Kong's "mallings process," see Tai-lok Lui, "The mallings of Hong Kong," in Gordon Matthews and Tai-lok Lui eds., *Consuming Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2001), 25.

of this “mall city” and the urban environment? What kinds of social imaginaries have Hong Kong’s shopping malls helped engender in the past, and what memories have been invoked and mobilized in the present in the attempt to wrestle these places from further transformation?

In the following, I consider these questions by examining the development of one of Hong Kong’s iconic shopping malls, the New Town Plaza in Shatin. Completed in 1984, the New Town Plaza has over the years become recognized as key to the success of Shatin’s new town development. Although many of the Plaza’s physical features were reminiscent of those of other shopping centers, to many Shatin’s residents it was a special place to which they had developed strong attachments. However, this sentiment began to change after 2005, when the Plaza underwent a series of renovations that resulted in the loss of much of its original character and the eventual closure of many long time retail shops that could not afford the escalating rent. While local residents lamented that they can no longer relate to the mall in the way they did in the past, these changes also ushered in a series of “bottom-up” initiatives to revive the sense of place and “community spirit.” These initiatives, along with those that have proliferated in other neighborhoods across the city, illustrate the widening contestations over urban renewal and conservation in an economy increasingly predicated on market optimization amidst ongoing political change.<sup>5</sup>

### **The New Town and the Mall: A Symbiotic Development**

The completion of the New Town Plaza in 1984 was arguably a historical moment in Hong Kong’s urban development. Although not the first shopping centre built as an integral part of a housing estate, it was by far the largest and the most spectacular, boasting an unprecedented one million square feet of retail space that also included a flagship Japanese department store, the Yaohan (八百伴)<sup>6</sup>. As noted by Anthony Yeh, the New Town Plaza was an early test case of “comprehensive planning,” which was adopted by the Hong Kong government in 1972.<sup>7</sup> The goal was to provide much-needed housing for the working populations in the then still rural New

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<sup>5</sup> See Cecilia Chu, “People Power as Exception: Three Controversies Over Privatization in Posthandover Hong Kong,” *Urban Studies* 47, 8 (July 2010): 1773-1792.

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion on the expansion of Yaohan in Hong Kong, see Lonny E. Carlile, “The Yaohan Group: Model or Maverick among Japanese Retailers in China?” in Kerrie L. MacPherson ed., *Asian Department Stores* (University of Hawaii Press, 1998), 233-252.

<sup>7</sup> Anthony Yeh, “Public Housing and New Town Development,” in Yue-man Yeung and Timothy K.Y. Wong eds., *Fifty Years of Housing in Hong Kong: A Golden Jubilee and Appraisal* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2003), 87-90.

Territories. Under this arrangement, the British new town planning concepts of “self-containment” and “balanced development” were adopted, the aim being to provide employment opportunities as well as shopping, recreational and community facilities for the new residents. Although the goal of “self-containment” was never fully realized due to inadequate employment in these areas, a large contingent of the members of the working class voluntarily moved to the new towns, not least due to the attractiveness of the shopping and other modern amenities.<sup>8</sup> The development of Shatin also came to represent the successful cooperation between town planners and private developers, with the latter assuming the responsibility for managing many public areas that connect the mall and other community spaces. With its central location and direct connection to major transit links, the New Town Plaza also became seen as the very heart of Shatin new town itself (FIG. 2 & 3).

While government planners often proclaim the New Town Plaza as a successful example of town planning, the developer of the mall, Sun Hung Kai Properties, refers to this development as a heroic move spearheaded by the company. The idea of building a mega mall in a newly developed urban area in the early 1980s was a huge gamble, on the account of a company representative, as the project risked failure if it was unable to bring in enough shoppers to the mall.<sup>9</sup> To ensure success, the company proposed two strategies. The first was to secure the lease of a flagship department store (which it managed to do after hard negotiations with the Japanese retailer Yaohan). And the second was to build a large car park for encouraging out-of-town shoppers to come to Shatin. In the beginning, the car park proposal was repeatedly rejected by the government for the reason that it went against the fundamental objective of new town development; that is, it must first and foremost serve the interests of the local community.<sup>10</sup> After many months of negotiations, the two parties finally made a compromise: Sun Hung Kai would be allowed to build an underground car park on the condition that it would also provide additional community facilities in the mall, including a bowling arena, a skating rink and billiard rooms that catered primarily for Shatin’s residents. The arrangement was seen as a “win-win” solution for all. For the government, the new provisions would ensure the comprehensiveness of new town planning without spending additional public money. At the same time, Sun Hung Kai received praise for its “ethical commitment” to doing something beneficial and meaningful for the

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<sup>8</sup> Between 1976 and 1986, almost 80% of the growth took place in the new towns, and the number of people living there had increased by an average of about 150%. See Yeh, “Public Housing and New Town Development,” 91-92.

<sup>9</sup> “人物專訪: 新市鎮創建里程碑: 訪問陳啟銘先生” (Interview with Mr. Chan Kai Ming), <http://www.shatin.hk>.

<sup>10</sup> “人物專訪: 新市鎮創建里程碑: 訪問陳啟銘先生.”

community – a move that was not usually expected from profit-making developers. And certainly for many local residents, the new facilities were welcome features that made them proud of living in Shatin.

Perhaps to the surprise of even the developer, the New Town Plaza rapidly emerged as the most popular mall in the city. Throughout the 1980s and 90s, it was the most visited shopping center not only in Hong Kong but also in the world, with an average of 150,000 visitors per day and reaching 200,000 in the weekends.<sup>11</sup> While the high number was boosted by the mall being a major thoroughfare connecting different public spaces, Sun Hung Kai also invested heavily in the Plaza's architectural design in the attempt to draw in more shoppers. These include providing attractive features in the open areas to create memorable experiences for the visiting crowds. Among the most well known was the fountain in the malls' central lobby, the first automated fountain installed in Hong Kong (FIG.4). Another highly praised design was the spectacular atrium constructed with curved glass panels, which again was the first in the city and became a precedent for many that followed (FIG.5). According to a representative of Sun Hung Kai, all of these elements were built using the most advanced technologies and followed the most up-to-date design trends in the world. And these had been proved to be tremendously successful not only in boosting the popularity and prestige of the New Town Plaza, but also became spectacular symbols of a modernizing, flourishing commercial culture that characterized Hong Kong in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

As mentioned earlier, the strong sense of community ties assumed by Shatin's residents and their collective sentiment toward the New Town Plaza seems to have defied the familiar critique of consumerist culture for atomizing individuals from social life. But as Lui Tai-lok has noted, it is important to distinguish Hong Kong's "mallng process" from those of other places such as North America, where the development of shopping centers was closely associated with increased automobile ownership and suburbanization.<sup>12</sup> The New Town Plaza and other shopping malls in the new towns were all built as an integral part of large housing estates and were promoted from the beginning as "community development." A key focus was on providing spaces for collective activities, including shopping, recreation and other forms of entertainment, all of which being

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<sup>11</sup> 張雅琳, "從「歡迎光臨」到「窮人免進」, 新不如舊的沙田新城市廣場?" 嶺南大學文化研究系碩士論文, 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Lui, "The Mallng of Hong Kong," 25. For a discussion on the development of shopping malls in North America, see Margaret Crawford, "The World in a Shopping Mall," in Michael Sorkin ed., *Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992), 3-30.

assumed to play significant roles in strengthening the sense of belonging amongst the new town residents. It was also in this context that mass consumption in Hong Kong became full-fledged. Indeed, Sun Hung Kai had from early on noticed the demographic change in Shatin, where a majority of the households were no longer members of the “poor working class.”<sup>13</sup> Rather, after having benefited from the rapid economic growth in the 1970s and 80s, they now made up an expanding middle-income group that were motivated to consume and to improve their standards of living. The need to appeal to these people also means that consumer goods must remain affordable for the masses and cater for popular taste. The arrangement of retail spaces and design of the mall itself also closely followed this direction. The idea was to provide a modern, attractive yet highly accessible shopping environment where different members of the new town families were able to find something they desired and through which imagined a better future on their own terms.

In recalling his experience growing up in Shatin, one resident, now in his early 30s, contended that the New Town Plaza was undoubtedly an important place that defined his childhood years.<sup>14</sup> The fact that the mall was connected to major public amenities, including the city hall, the public library and the large public park along Shatin’s waterfront made it not only a popular meeting point but also a central place for socializing. The resident also revealed that although he did not have much money to spend in the past, he would often linger at various places of the mall, such as the MacDonald restaurant, where he would meet up with his classmates for drinks and chats after school hours. Another favorite spot of his was the Commercial Press bookstore (商務印書館), where he had spent endless hours browsing the latest books and popular magazines. Like many others, he would also sometimes go to the mall for people watching, or simply to enjoy the air-conditioned interior during hot summer days. Indeed, similar narratives surrounding the New Town Plaza have also been told by many Shatin residents. Although it was a space of consumption geared toward profit-making, the mall was also something more to its users, who inscribed different meanings and values to the place in ways that made sense to them.

### **A New Mall in the New Millennium**

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<sup>13</sup>Also see Lui’s discussion on the changing demographic in the new towns, “The Malling of Hong Kong,” 39.

<sup>14</sup>Private interview with a Shatin resident, 2013.

As with many narratives of places undergoing rapid change, these fond memories of the New Town Plaza have become more pronounced in recent years, when the management of the mall embarked on a series of expensive renovations that resulted in the loss of much of the building's original character.<sup>15</sup> The decision, which was made in the early 2000s after a prolonged economic downturn, was predicated on the need to adapt to a changing economy in which mass consumption was no longer the dominant business model. With affluence increasingly concentrating on a narrow segment of the population, it was believed that the creation of a niche market catered for the more wealthy would allow retailers and mall owners to gain more profits. While this has been a general trend in other parts of the world, the prospects of transforming Hong Kong's shopping malls into a more upscale environment was also boosted by a rapid increase of wealthy Mainland Chinese tourists in recent years. This growth was an effect of a government scheme initiated in 2003 in the attempt to shore up the economy through tourism. Since then the scheme has ushered in hundreds of thousands of Mainland visitors.<sup>16</sup> Although this influx has brought sizable revenue to businesses and the government, it also led to escalating rent and closures of many long time local shops that were unable to compete with the more well-capitalized international retail chains. The situation incited discontent from many ordinary Hong Kong citizens, who lamented that the local environment and "Hong Kong's way of life" are under threat in an economy increasingly subsumed to the logic of the market on the one hand, and to the "invasion" of wealthy Mainland consumers on the other.

Amongst the many changes made to the New Town Plaza in the renovation, one that prompted the most criticism was the removal of the iconic Music Fountain from the mall's central lobby. While the management saw it to be an outdated feature that no longer fit with contemporary design trends, many Shatin residents felt that the removal represented a huge loss of something that had long defined their sense of place and collective memories. Another more recent change that instigated an outcry was the relocation of the Commercial Press bookstore, which could no longer afford the high rent after the renovation<sup>17</sup> (FIG.6). In view of this and the continual exodus

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<sup>15</sup> For a discussion of the transformation of the New Town Plaza and related personal reflections on these changes in Chinese language, see "新城市廣場的變臉與光復," *House News*, 17 October, 2012; 明永昌, "一个商場的故事," 聯合早報, 30 October 2012; 阿果, "是新城市廣場, 也是香港故事," 港文集, 14 October 2012; 張雅琳, "從「歡迎光臨」到「窮人免進」, 新不如舊的沙田新城市廣場?"

<sup>16</sup> In the attempt to boost Hong Kong's sagging economy, the government introduced the "Individual Visit Scheme" in 2003, making it easier for more Mainland Chinese tourists to visit the city.

<sup>17</sup> This relocation of the bookstore, which occurred in late 2012, has incited great reactions from the Shatin community and heated discussions in the Chinese media. For example, see 紀曉風, "「商務」結業哀新市鎮變質 沙田爆發另類光復運動," *Hong Kong Economic Journal*, 15 October 2012.

of other long time retailers, a number of residents initiated a campaign, “Help New Town Plaza,” with the goal to prevent the building from further changes (FIG.7 & 8). While it remains unclear to what extent this campaign will have implications on the ongoing transformation of the mall, it has helped raised awareness of the significance of the New Town Plaza and interests in the Shatin community itself. This can be seen, for example, in the emergence of several local tours last year that took visitors to explore different parts of the town. These tours were guided by young people who grew up in the area, the so-called “Shantinities,” who were keen to promote the uniqueness of their neighborhoods, including the residential estates, popular eateries and other “local heritage” that are not well known to outsiders and even to some of the residents living here.<sup>18</sup> These activities has also helped direct attention to the wider context beyond the New Town Plaza, whilst in the process enable a better understanding of the relationship between the mall and the new town.

It should be noted here that these initiatives were not isolated instants confined to one district, but part and parcel of a wider struggle of local communities against urban renewal projects across Hong Kong in recent years. As I have discussed elsewhere, these contestations were themselves closely tied to larger processes of economic and political change in the territory, particular those after the Asian financial crisis that coincided with the change of Hong Kong’s sovereignty in 1997.<sup>19</sup> The slow progress in the push for democratic reform, the accelerating privatization of public assets, and increased reliance on Mainland visitors for shoring up the economy have all contributed to a growing pessimism amongst Hong Kong citizens about the territory’s urban future. At the same time, the desire to preserve “Hong Kong’s way of life” amidst ongoing integration with Mainland China have been fueling a new series of grassroots-led activities that encourage people to rediscover the city’s neighborhoods and their histories. A common emphasis running through these activities is “community ties and cohesion,” which have been widely hailed to have aided Hong Kong’s past economic success and defined the collective memories of many working class families, including a large contingent of those living in the new towns.

It is within this context that the New Town Plaza, along with other familiar places and objects of consumption, became seen as testimonies of the “success story” of Hong Kong – a story that centers on the themes of upward mobility, modernization and mass consumption. It is important,

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<sup>18</sup> “一樓一古：沙田友苦笑，家變，” *Apple Daily*, 20 February 2013. For an example of these tours, see <http://cache.org.hk/word/shatin.pdf>.

<sup>19</sup> Cecilia Chu, “Heritage of Disappearance: Shekkipmei and Collective Memories in Posthandover Hong Kong,” *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review* 18, 2 (2007).



however, to note that while these themes remain central to many narratives about Hong Kong's past, there has been a shift of emphasis on the roles assumed by the key actors over time. As this paper has shown, the development of the New Town Plaza has long been hailed by the government as an ingenious case of good town planning and by the developer as a heroic undertaking of private enterprise. In both of these narratives, "community development" has been repeatedly invoked to underscore the "ethical commitment" of officials and the developer to serve the interests of new town residents. Although few may challenge these claims when looking back in history, they have now, ironically, become the rationale for resistance against new forms of development in the present, whereas the government, developers and big corporations are being accused to be "colluding" with each other to maximize revenue at the expense of the welfare of ordinary citizens. And there is, indeed, no better case to illustrate these dynamics than the transformation of the New Town Plaza – the exemplar of Hong Kong's consumerist culture and a cherished symbol of "community development."

# Narrating the Mall City

## Images and Captions:



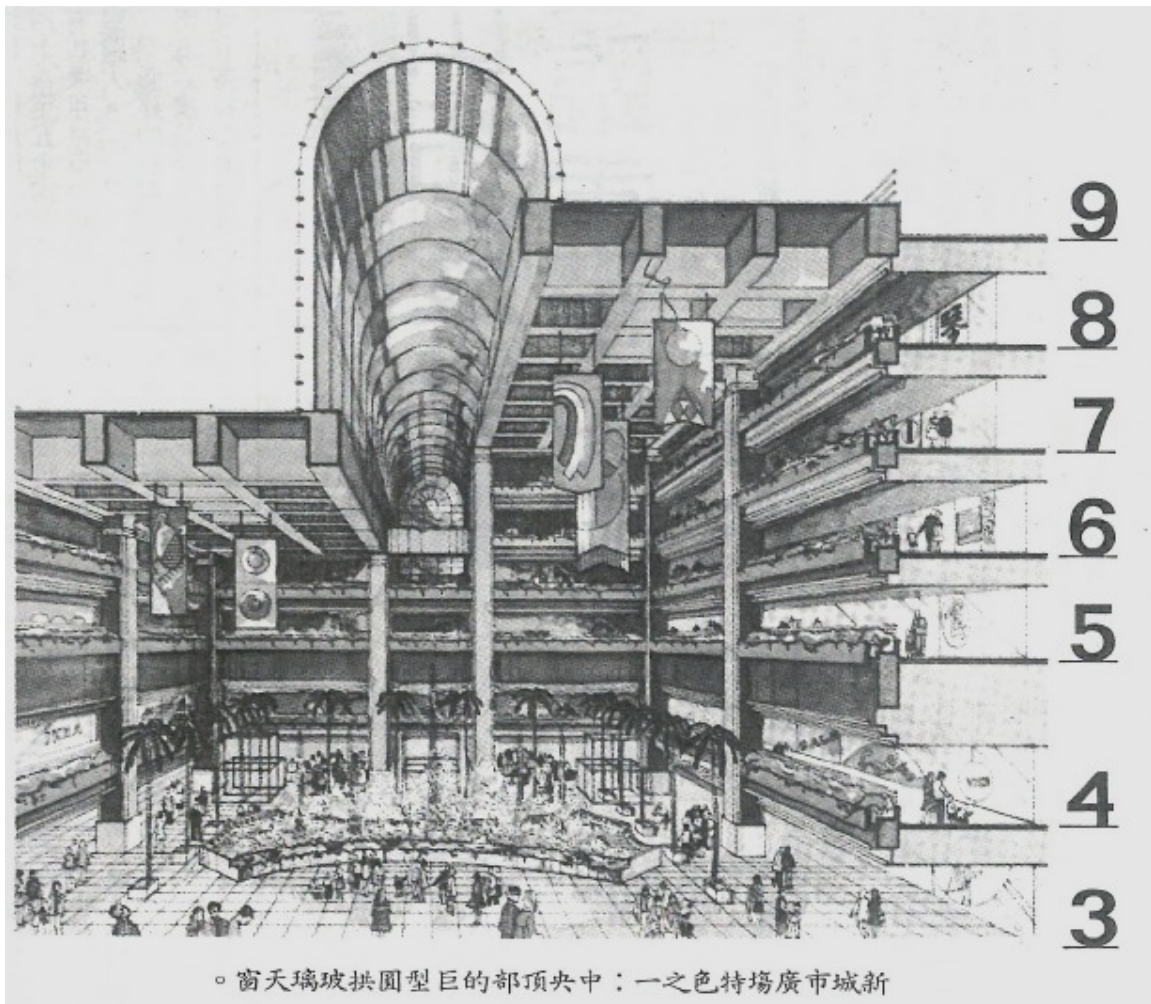
**FIG. 1** King Wah Centre, one of the many older shopping malls in Hong Kong that is about to be demolished to make way for a more upscale shopping center, 2013. (Source: *Apple Daily*)



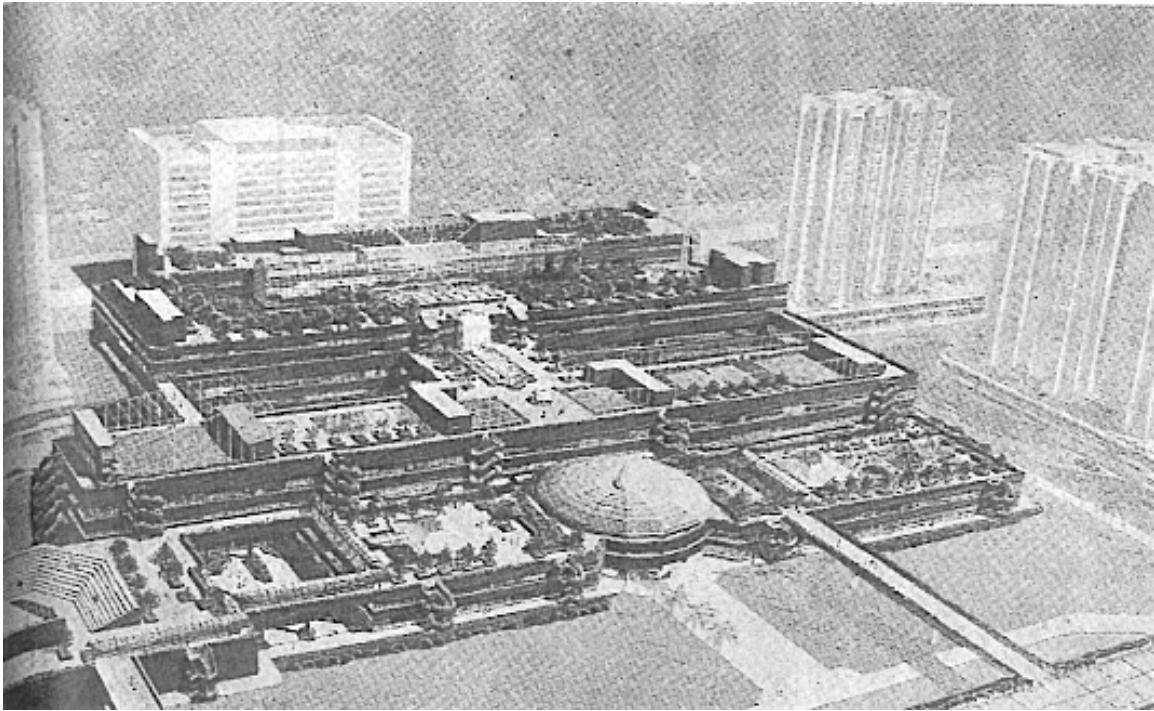
**FIG. 2** The New Town Plaza and its adjacent community facilities, Shatin. (Courtesy of Wikipedia user -Wing1990hk)



**FIG. 3** The Musical Fountain, an iconic feature of the New Town Plaza (Source: *House News*).



**FIG. 4** A perspective drawing of the New Town Plaza in 1984 showing the mall's central atrium (Source: 新沙田月刊, 10 April 1984).



**FIG. 5** A rendering of the proposed New Town Plaza in 1984. (Source: 新沙田月刊, 10 April 1984).



**FIG. 6** An interior view of the New Town Plaza after the renovation. (Courtesy of Wikipedia user -Wing1990hk)

# 「商務」結業哀新市鎮變質 沙田爆發另類光復運動



一場光復上水站運動，令多個部門在特首梁振英的一聲令下後，被一同參演一打打擊水貨客大龍鳳，而另一場本土光復運動，原來已經如箭在弦，但拉一次的對象與目標地點，似與內地人有關，卻實是由港人自願自導！這次的「劇場」向南移轉，來到被譽為香港新市鎮典範的沙田。

事情源起，是屬沙田心臟地帶建築的沙田新城市廣場，近年有多間國際品牌先後進駐，吸引大量內地自由行政客光臨，影響居民日常生活，及至近日，在商場內經營四分之世紀的高裕印書館，因續約問題宣布本月底結業，要遷往較偏遠的舖位繼續經營，新店面積大減三成，事件一石激起千重浪，引來網民在社交網站群起留言聲討，並開始組織昔日商場平民化的日子，最後有人建議發起一場「光復新城市」行動，更綱要「做得比光復上水站好」。

確實，今天的新城市廣場早已今非昔比，那個建於八十年代初的「新界第一號」大型商場，過去因有八倍伴而聞名全港，而踏入2003年後，受惠「自由行」與香港經濟復蘇，發展商耗資3億元作全面翻新，商場即全面「升呢」，名店數目與中環與銅鑼灣的大商場不相上下，但沙田區內居民，生活卻未見更趨便利。

然而再觀沙田，變化何嘗不是一脈相承？隨著香港急起發展，壯大了土生土長的中產階層，沙田也由初期以公屋、藍屋為主，加入了更多中產私人屋苑，令沙田走向中產化甚至近年的豪宅化，例如上環開辦的沙田樂雅山，部分單位最高達3.5萬元，勢創新界區新高，但「沙田友」恐怕心中有數，實情是禍不是福。

## 雙曾合力規劃沙田鄉村變都會

沙田，並與與屯門同為香港首創開發的新市鎮，其中沙田面積達35.67平方公里，面積冠絕所有新市鎮。截至去年，沙田人口達63萬，人口之高僅次於荃灣，並被譽為是香港新市鎮的典範，其背後功臣之一，可算非前特首曾憲梓莫屬！

眾所周知，他自70年代初已參與沙田的政務工作，並在1982年6月至84年7月間出任沙田政務專員，當時其上司為新界政務司盧鴻輝爵士，而現時的政務司司長曾俊華，就在1983年2月起擔任其副手。

曾憲梓當時工作之一，正是負責開發沙田新市鎮，故沙田猶如他的「救生仔」，也難怪他在競選連任特首時，亦特別返回沙田「尋根」。

至於開發沙田的過程，據曾憲梓在卸任前於《香港家書》中憶述，過去沙田的城門河兩岸是一大片農田，他當時也無法想像沙田會變成今天的模樣，而在開發沙田過程中，由政府官員、鄉紳至普通居民，全都目標一致，才能把多管齊下發展計劃快速實現，其中包括了振興沙田經濟，他就曾與份參與振興日本百貨公司八佰伴

在沙田界築，當年對方要求舉行大型開幕活動，曾憲梓建議在城門河放煙花與民同樂，最後更舉人比高洪洪任署理港督的夏森基商量，結果成功獲批，成了沙田歷史中經典的一頁。

至於曾憲梓在沙田的另一「政績」，就是培育了香港首條全職青少年足球隊「沙高隊」。一貫以來，棒球世界多為日本及美國隊伍壟斷，華籍兒童參加球隊的人數一向偏低，多得曾憲梓在1982年時同意撥款80萬元撥款及場地資助，由沙田體育會成立沙高隊，把一批童叟輩，被老師評為「無聊可憐」的沙田區小孩就搖身一變，從地獄式訓練後，球隊成立百年即成為全港第一，在1983年舉行的香港少隊聯盟公開賽中，擊敗日本隊奪得冠軍，消息轟動全港，為華人棒球史寫下光輝的一頁。

為紀念此事，沙田區議會及民政署把橫越城門河的其中一條行車橋命名作「沙高橋」，籌備備二十年，曾憲梓仍指當日目睹沙高隊奪得一事歷歷在目，更稱那份成功感，還打回國際金盃就穩定版市不虛多謬，是有生以來最想回去的日子。



FIG. 7 A recent article that discussed the recent protests against the transformation of the New Town Plaza. (Source: Hong Kong Economic Journal)

# 發動網民力量 還我港人廣場

新地引入15家國際時裝品牌和5個年輕品牌，卻漠視社會責任及港人意見。事實是，當年政府以優惠的條款興建新城市廣場，目的就是給予居住沙田新市鎮的居民有一個公共空間。

**\*書店及多元商戶被迫遷**

**\*UA沙田戲院大樓停工3年 發展商懶理**

**\*戶外平台空間修復馬虎 未能讓公眾善用**

**\*商場過往曾違規地契，過往曾否違規出租、關閉或更改設施用途等，至今仍是一個謎。**

## 光復新城市 網民行動

10月21日 (星期日)下午2時  
沙田大會堂廣場 (近一期地下正門)

\*本活動為HelpNewTownPlaza 發起。唯一一切的籌備及參與過程一切由網民自發，與HelpNewTownPlaza 無關。  
\*由於商場屬私人地方，亦同警方有緊密的溝通及合作。當日參加者在商場範圍內參與活動時有機會被商場人員阻止，亦可能需負上一定法律責任，請小心衡量個人安全。  
\*一切行為而直接或間接導致的民事或刑事法律責任由當日參與者承擔；本專頁及活動發起人HelpNewTownPlaza 概不負責。

FIG. 8 Poster of the “Help New Town Plaza” campaign, 2012. (Source: Help New Town Plaza Facebook page)