

A PANACEA FOR ALL (URBAN) ILLS? Hong Kong's New Towns Revisited

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Hong Kong is a wonder city in many ways. Its geographical location in the Pearl River Delta with the Victoria harbour as the nucleus of its economic development, proximity to China, free market conditions, severe scarcity of land for development coupled with a steady growth of population and alarming levels of environmental pollution are the key factors that have posed both opportunities and threats to its urban growth, if not, for its mere existence.

For instance, within a total land area of 1,098 km² (as per 1999 figures), of which developable land is only about 220 km², a population of 6.8 million is concentrated with an annual increase of about 1.3% and its population density in the range of 500 to 3000 persons/ hectare (Ganesan and Lau, 1999). The territory's urban fabric is tightly knit with high-rise buildings averaging 15 storeys in height, making Hong Kong the world's most densely populated city. Although the magnitude of urban issues Hong Kong has confronted is unprecedented, within nearly 100 years of British Occupation up to 1997, it has risen to the eighth largest trading economy and fourth largest banking centre in the world (Chan and Hills, 1997). Today Hong Kong is an *efficient machine* to live in while gaining such reputations as *the Service and Trade Centre in Asia*, and *the Gateway to China*.



Sha Tin is Hong Kong's second largest New Town, which belongs to the 'first generation'. Today its population exceeds 700,000.

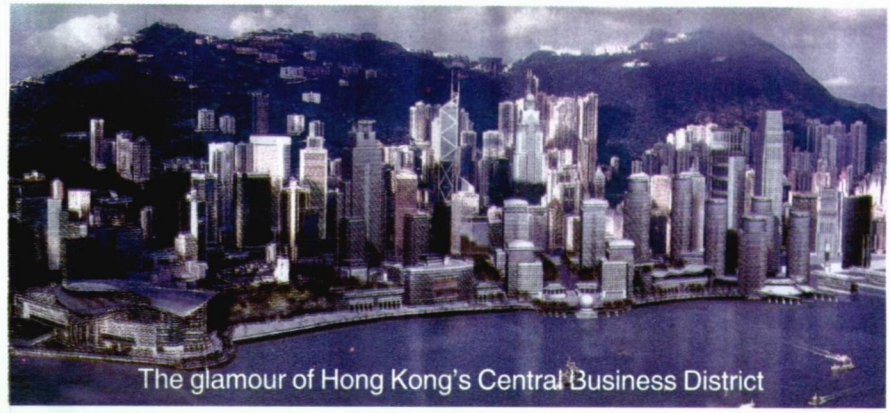


Living in the sky?
A typical modern housing block

Characteristics of Hong Kong's Urban Spatial Structure

Hong Kong's success as one of the world's most competitive service and trade centres has had a reciprocal relationship with its urban spatial structure. While Hong Kong as a whole being an extremely dense *compact city*, its spatial structure comprises of poly-nucleated settlement clusters around the core, the Central District.

As a planned intervention to mitigate extreme urban population concentrations and the resultant decadent state in residential neighbourhoods such as Mongkok, the New Towns emerged to represent poly-nucleated settlement clusters as a result of an ambitious New Towns Development Programme launched in 1972 with a plan to provide modern affordable housing for 1.8 million people. Many of these New Towns have been built in the New Territories, away from the older densely populated urban areas of Hong Kong Island and Kowloon.



The glamour of Hong Kong's Central Business District

Goals and Objectives of New Town Development

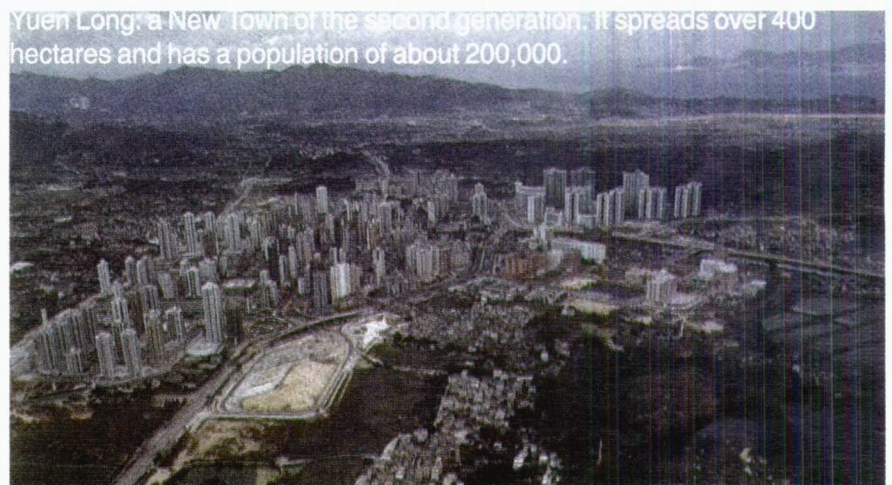
The primary goal of developing New Towns has been to satisfy the housing needs of the growing population along with the rising living standards associated with the aspiration of the community for a better living environment. Although the target population and design of every New Town vary according to local circumstances, each has one common set of objectives:

- to be well balanced and reasonably self-contained,
- to provide a modern and spacious living environment.

Interestingly, these objectives are found to be the ideals of other New Towns found elsewhere in the world. However, Hong Kong's situation is unique in terms of density and magnitude*. Achievement of these objectives relies largely on the provision of three basic requirements; employment, housing and, utilities and amenities for healthy living.

Hong Kong's New Towns appear in three generations. Tsuen Wan, Sha Tin and Tuen Mun are the earliest New Towns. They were mainly manufacturing industry based settlements, with a skilled and semi-skilled labour force that were readily absorbed by such industries. These were followed by a second generation of New Towns, namely, Yuen Long, Tai Po, Fanling/ Sheung Shui and Ma On Shan. The more recent New Towns include Junk Bay and Tin Shui Wai.

* Within a total development area of 10,130 hectares the New Towns in Hong Kong accommodate a population of 3.7 million. The development area of most of the New Towns ranges from 500 to 2,500 hectares while the target population ranges from 200,000 to 700,000. This means on average the population density is in the range of 36,700 persons per km². In comparison, even the most densely populated New Town of the United States has a density of only 10,000 persons per km² (Yang, 1997).



Compact living even in its seeming extreme end has many advantages with parks, playgrounds, shopping, and most other services right at your doorstep!

New Towns as seen today

As the name suggests, New Towns create a picture of a people-centred, large-scale residential neighbourhood with other utilities and amenities. This image to a larger extent has been realised in the New Towns of Hong Kong.

The first generation of New Towns has got an overwhelming percentage of public housing estates, mainly because they addressed the issue of resettlement of low-income families who were congregated in shanty settlements and in highly dense areas of Kowloon District. However, the more recent ones have both private and public housing estates and thus are more heterogeneous in nature. This has given people with more options for housing depending on their affordability levels.

Along with the growth of the New Towns, the number and range of facilities such as new schools, medical facilities, playgrounds, open spaces, sports centres and shopping centres have been located.



Cycle tracks and open promenades are planned to keep people away from the city traffic.



Public housing in Tung Chung- a New Town of the 'third generation'



Sha Tin town park - 'an urban lung' carefully planned to balance the built density

There is also a marked improvement on the physical environment compared to their earlier counterparts in the older obsolete urban areas. Inadequate open spaces in residential areas is a much noted issue in urban Hong Kong and this has been given a greater consideration in the planning of New Towns. Provision of well-landscaped open spaces and careful segregation of people and traffic have enabled achieving high environmental standards, still within a very high-density development.

The location of almost all early New Towns was away from Hong Kong's Central Business District and was in the New Territories as a measure to ease the urban congestion. This trend has continued in the more recent New Towns too, and their location is also coupled with rail-based development, which is an environmental friendly approach to transport. The future New Towns are being planned to be even more compact and coherent urban units. They are to be concentrated within 500 metres of convenient walking distance to the rail stations.

Some Points to Ponder...

Hong Kong's New Towns, no doubt are a very ambitious and probably the world's largest re-settlement programme at the time of its inception in early 1970s. Its success is phenomenal in the context of the issues it addressed at the early stages. However, there are some important issues too to be reflected upon.

The New Towns Programme was launched with the primary goal of decentralising the urban growth into New Territories and that necessitated its key objectives, 'balance' and 'self-containment'. While most other aspects pertinent to these objectives are fulfilled, doubts are raised on the provision of employment within these settlements to make them truly self-contained and thereby, balanced.

It is also quite interesting and relevant to project the decentralisation efforts, which appeared in the guise of New Towns, within the context of Hong Kong's pattern of economic development, which has seen a clear transition from a manufacturing economy to a service economy over the past few decades. Thus the number of employment opportunities and workforce in the manufacturing sector diminished over time. At the same time, agglomeration economies attracted service sector businesses such as banks and Headquarters of multi-national companies etc. into the Central District, away from the New Territories or New Towns. There was no significant concentration of employment opportunities in and around the New Towns to absorb their massive work force rather than letting them all the way moving out towards the already extreme dense major urban centres. Consequently, the New Towns were transformed into 'living quarters' for people who would come at the end of the day to spend the night. This phenomenon has eventually contributed to an exodus daily commuter population into the urban centres, mainly to the Central



Settlements are being concentrated along MTR lines. This seems setting the trend for future New Towns

District and some also raises the question based on the principles of New Town formation to create poly-nucleated settlements around the central core. Nuclei have happened in the guise of concentrated housing clusters, but not in the wider sense of self-sustained settlements, the success of which lies on the provision of employment opportunities for majority of its people.

Interestingly, planning of the future New Towns along the Mass Transit Railway (MTR) lines seem to be a reactionary measure to this trend. The underlying thought seems to be the provision of rail transport, which is more environmentally friendly and efficient for the commuter population, who will be located within walking distance to railway stations.

One could still justify travelling a long distance as long as it is efficient, affordable and environmentally friendly, and a convenient and comfortable neighbourhood is provided for living, which has well been the case in Hong Kong's New Towns. This however may need a second thought on the line of decentralising employment

opportunities too and formulate policy and planning measures with the view to enable the key objectives of New Towns, balance and self-containment in a much more sustained way.

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