

# Wanchai 2010: Towards sustainable urban transformation

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### Urban environmental degradation

Within the last few years Hong Kong has been following the general consciousness shared by most world-class cities in its attitudes towards generating an overall sustainable urban environment. Google search 'sustainable Hong Kong' and chances are several websites from either private-sector organisations, like the HKSDF (Hong Kong Sustainable Development Forum) to public-interest groups like Hong Kong People's Council for Sustainable Development will appear. Most issues raised within each group are similar and everyone is trying to find the right solutions towards a more holistic and cooperative urban development. For example, air pollution and how to alleviate it has been by far the most important topic of concern. Besides the obvious health issues, the visual impact of pollution is particularly striking especially for tourists who strain their eyes daily for a view of the Hong Kong skyline, usually obscured by a thick cloud of urban fog. While many contributors to this urban fog are seemingly out of our control, like factory emissions from China, the most pressing problem for most city dwellers is the accumulation of pollutants emitted by vehicles that are trapped in areas around Hong Kong where high density pedestrian zones exist.

Another major cause of urban environmental degradation is the Hong Kong attitude towards waste, most specifically building waste disposal. While a few builders are gradually working towards a more efficient zero-waste construction approach, there is still the issue of waste accumulated through demolition, and the choice of materials and methods of construction which could minimise further building waste disposal in the future. In an ever evolving city like Hong Kong, the issue of building material as waste and its life cycles is very important in gauging the greenness of a new development method. According to Angela Tam (2006), author of *Sustainable building in Hong Kong: The past, present and future*, 99% of all building materials are reusable and/or recyclable. The most common materials that can be recycled are aluminium air ducts, steel and lighting boxes. Other materials such as concrete, bricks and other aggregates can be used for paving or creating decorative walls.

A better approach of reuse and recycle would be no demolition at all but a program retrofit—especially appropriate for older cities like Hong Kong with plenty of architectural history. Transformations could be small-scale, like the preservation of old Chinese buildings, or have a larger impact, like the new headquarters of the Electrical and Mechanical Services Department (EMSD) which was born out of an old air-cargo terminal in Kowloon Bay. If new buildings have to be constructed—the Chater House in Central is a great example—then it would be best to make use of the latest in prefabricated technology to construct facades and internal architectural features offsite with a great degree of precision, in order to minimise waste in construction as well as its own reappropriation or reuse.

### Sustainable urban environments can develop

So does Hong Kong have a greener future ahead? Fortunately with the possibility of two environmental assessment schemes to help rate the greening of new construction, with HK-BEAM (Hong Kong Building Environmental Assessment Method) and the CEPAS (the Comprehensive Environmental Performance Assessment Scheme), theory will move aggressively forward into common practice. Besides working towards greener building methods, green developments can occur within already existing neighbourhoods.

There is a possibility for more holistic sustainable developments to be made off current Urban Renewal Authority projects, with the most controversial of them being the re-development of Lee Tung Street in Wanchai. Existing post-war buildings on that street may not meet the criteria for preservation but in order to reduce construction waste and to reinforce architectural heritage in the upper Wanchai area, transforming Lee Tung Street into a modern tourist and community attraction may be the key to spur sustainable development within a larger existing context. Historically, Wanchai has always been a very integral business hub for Hong Kong and today is a major link between Causeway Bay and government, non-government and private business institutions.

The Urban Renewal Authority aims to upgrade the areas around key business centres with new towers, new residences and a new indoor air-conditioned food market which will eventually transform the Wanchai of history into something perhaps generic and ordinary. A holistic sustainable urban development would take into account the three pillars of sustainability—the environmental, the social, and the economic—as a driving precedence for a new development concept. Lee Tung Street is a perfect canvas for a future case study for sustainability for this neighbourhood is not quite as innovative or revolutionary as it is just plain common sense.

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**Ghost Town:**

An art installation captures the residents who once lived in a street evacuated for total redevelopment in the heart of Wanchai.

**The environmental, the social and the economic**

To alleviate further micro-climatic pollution of the area, the street should be pedestrian orientated and vehicle free. Presently, there are plenty of streets around north Wanchai that are vehicle free. This is nothing new. If it were to be implemented, one of the major blows to social and community culture would be the demolition of open-air food markets in and around Cross Street due to the emergence of a new-indoor Wanchai Market within the same area. An existing open air street market also exists on Gresson Street towards Admiralty. Street markets actually alleviate traffic pollution there and invigorate social and communal interaction among residents of the area and their visitors. The reduction of vehicular traffic (which contributes to the reduction of vehicular noise and emissions) and the solidification of a sustainable market community, are major systems within an ideal sustainable urban environment. If the city builds and plans for vehicles, then the area will only be inviting more vehicles. If the city builds and plans for more pedestrians, then more pedestrians will make use of these environments.

In order to reduce the impact of building waste, planners, designers, engineers and developers must be serious about the conservation of most existing building structures and architectures on the site. There have been many successful re-appropriation projects in Europe and even mainland China of existing structures such as residential/business lofts, studios, restaurants and shopping areas, and Lee Tung Street has the advantage and the opportunity for that kind of enlightened development. Additionally, old building parts can be reused and retrofitted into the project in many other ways. Products and materials used can either be recycled from site or be fitted with one of the thousands of newly recycled building products currently available on the market.

As for economic sustainability, the incorporation of local and community orientated businesses should be considered when renting out spaces. It's about time more art-based and local designer oriented trades, like furniture and fashion, get focus and frontage here in Hong Kong as they do in cities like Beijing and Shanghai. With Queen's Road East as an interior design sourcing street and Start Street as a gallery destination, Lee Tung Street as a commercial, art-based, open-air market destination may be a way to generate a new kind of economy that is produced and sold in a self-sustaining way for that specific area. If one were to look at the self-sustaining 798 Artist's Compound in Beijing, generating a micro-economy rooted in art not only benefits community and tourism, but overall urban culture as well. This is not a program borne out of number crunching but a basic environmental, social and economic need with plenty of long-term rewards for Wanchai and the future of urban sustainable development as a whole. Now that we have the ideas and the education at our hands, all we need is the essential willpower of the city of Hong Kong to help make these changes a reality.

*Editor's note: As we go to print, development and design for the future of Lee Tung Street is moving forward. Renderings of the project propose a completely pedestrian-oriented street with a 3-5 storey shopfront; the taller buildings set back and hidden away from the commercially-activated pedestrian zone. The new Wanchai Market is located in the podium of a new luxury residential building. A handful of other architecturally historic buildings in Wanchai have or will be turned into commercial or residential spaces without having to resort to demolition. The outlook is positive for preservation in Hong Kong.*

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*References*

Tam, A. (2006), *Sustainable building in Hong Kong: The past, present and future*. Insitu Publishing: Hong Kong.

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