

How to Lose a Harbor

For more than a century, Hong Kong has polluted and misused its greatest asset. But a sea change in attitude may be on the way

BY CHAIM ESTULIN | HONG KONG

The sun is shining on the balcony of the Quarterdeck Club Seafood Restaurant and Grill, and luncheon diners have a terrific view of Hong Kong's Victoria Harbour, full of wooden sampans and junks, speeding ferries and lavish white yachts. It's the picture-perfect postcard image that Hong Kong promotes to potential visitors from abroad.

Good luck scoring that view if you live in the territory. The Quarterdeck is one of the very few al fresco restaurants open to the public on the harbor, and visiting it on foot involves negotiating an obstacle course over highways and through office buildings. And—be warned—the view isn't entirely idyllic. As well as those sampans, patrons can also watch half a dozen barges dumping stone and dirt into the water, hence each day robbing Hong Kong of a little more of its most famous feature.

That process has been going on pretty much from the time that Britain took possession of what its Foreign Secretary back in 1841 called a "barren rock." Whatever else they may have been good at, successive generations of Hong Kong people have been terrific at filling in their harbor. The fashionistas' haunts in Causeway Bay, the new 88-story IFC II building (sixth tallest in the world) in Central, Suzie Wong's bars in Wanchai, the world's busiest container port, the runway at the old Kai Tak airport that used to have white-knuckled flyers fingering their rosaries—they were all built on reclaimed land. One hundred and sixty years of hauling landfill from mountainsides and construction dumps and shoveling it into the water has left Hong Kong with a harbor that, between the Central business district and Tsim Sha Tsui on the Kowloon side, is now just about 1 km wide—shorter than the span of New York's George Washington Bridge over the Hudson River. Visitors to Hong Kong who arrive in town expecting an easily accessible, vibrant waterfront like the ones in Sydney or Baltimore are in for a rude surprise: most of Hong Kong's shoreline is inaccessibly hidden behind skyscrapers, parking lots, utilities and highways. "I can't get a beer [on the waterfront]," says Paul Zimmerman, an executive at a local venture-capital firm who in 2002 founded Designing Hong Kong Harbour to encourage new thinking in waterfront planning. "I need to jump over road barriers to get there." And once you've got over those barriers and found the water, here's a tip: stay out of it. Each day, 450,000 cu m of raw semi-filtered sewage—the same volume as 200 Olympic-size full swimming pools—is flushed into the harbor. Pretty much the only things that live there are rabbitfish and ponyfish, acorn barnacles, green-lipped mussels, and bacteria.

But after years of despoiling its very name—Hong Kong means "fragrant harbor" in Chinese—things may finally be about to change. An unlikely coalition of environmental activists, business leaders and (this being Hong Kong) property developers is pushing for a rethink of how to make the harbor

something more than an international embarrassment. Last week, about 70 executives from more than 90 of the city's biggest companies and institutions quietly assembled on the 40th floor of the HSBC headquarters—the very heart of the territory's traditional business community—for the first meeting of a new body, the Harbour Business Forum. According to one participant in the gathering, the group will act as a lobby for better use of the harbor and will press for the creation of a single authority to take charge of the harbor's development. "This will give the government a jolt," says Roger Nissim, a project planning manager for Sun Hung Kai Ltd., Hong Kong's largest property developer, and a member of the Forum. "We are not seen as the lunatics, we are not the green groups, we are not radical."

The business leaders' timing could not be better. Two major plans for the harbor are now in limbo, having been subject to a barrage of legal and popular complaints. A planned 26-hectare reclamation in Wanchai—whose principal purpose was for a highway—was halted last year by a court challenge. And proposals for an ambitious arts district on reclaimed land in West Kowloon have been frozen by public protests over the government's intention to hand the \$6.8 billion project to a single developer. In this enforced breathing space, Hong Kong has a rare opportunity to figure out, once and for all, what it wants to do with its most valuable resource.

Nobody doubts that without reclamation there wouldn't be a Hong Kong. The narrow band of land squeezed between the water and the hills of Hong Kong island was always too small to nourish the territory's ambitions. But the development of the city's waterfront has been both relentless and uncoordinated. Hong Kong has no central planning for the harbor: its use and misuse are dictated by more than a dozen competing government departments and covered by at least 15 separate zoning plans. Hong Kong's "relationship with the waterfront was always an awkward thing," says Richard Marshall, an urban design director for the planning firm EDAW, who led a Harvard University study of the harbor in 2000. "It's surprising, given the identity the waterfront has with Hong Kong."

Maybe not too surprising. In a city where the word taxes has long had people reaching for the smelling salts, successive British colonial governments learned to use sales of reclaimed land to finance their budgets. In the mid-1990s—the last time a chunk of centrally located landfill came on the market—the administration sold 0.35 hectares to Citic Group for \$430 million, while a consortium of developers paid \$1.54 billion for the right to develop another site that now includes the IFC II skyscraper. "It was cheap, easy money," says Sun Hung Kai's Nissim, who for 20 years had worked as a senior government surveyor. "But it spun out of control."

While Hong Kong's government was milking the harbor as a tax cow, it missed what was happening elsewhere in the world. As shipping moved from downtown wharves to purpose-built container ports, old cities discovered that their weedy waterfronts could be reworked into the sort of environments that would attract—and retain—both tourist dollars and the creative minds that give a place fizz. From Boston to Bilbao, from Singapore to Sydney—even, for heaven's sake, in Liverpool, the ultimate rusted-up port—city planners have remade harbors into lively, people-friendly places full of restaurants, design studios and cultural attractions. "Waterfronts are now cherished assets," says Marshall. According to a study by the Boston Foundation, the \$21 billion, 20-year cleanup of Beantown's once dank harbor has created 47,000 jobs and attracted \$8.4 billion in "present or planned" new investment. "We have a renaissance here," says Bruce Berman, spokesman for Boston's Save the Harbor/Save the Bay, the group that spearheaded the waterfront revitalization. "It has transformed the city and put us in a very competitive position." Hong Kong could reap similar rewards. A Designing Hong Kong Harbour study predicts that a vibrant Victoria Harbour with

restaurants, cultural venues and marinas would create an estimated 50,000 jobs.

Over the past few years, the realization that Hong Kong, too, can do something with its harbor has begun to sink into the city's consciousness. Winston Chu, 65, remembers taking girlfriends for evening strolls along the harbor in the 1960s. Forty years later, Chu collected tens of thousands of signatures for a law banning most harbor reclamation works. One of his inspirations was his 90-year-old mother, Cissy, who invited him up to her harbor-view penthouse garden in 1995 and, pointing to the shrinking waterway, "gave me a scolding and instructed me to do something about it." In 1997, in the waning days of British rule, the local Legislative Council passed the Harbour Protection Ordinance. The incoming postcolonial administration tried, but failed, to repeal the law, and in 2002 pressed ahead with a plan to build a mostly underground highway from Central to Causeway Bay through reclaimed land. Chu spent nearly \$1 million of his own money on a legal challenge to the scheme, and in January 2004, the Court of Final Appeal struck down the government's ambitions. The judges deemed the waterfront "a natural heritage" to be trifled with only when there is "an overriding public need." Part of the land for that project has already been reclaimed, but the government is blocked from reclaiming the other 26 hectares.

Michael Suen, Hong Kong's Secretary of Housing, Planning and Lands, insists that he and his colleagues have got the message. "We know the harbor is our greatest asset," he stresses. But Suen says that somehow or other, a new highway has to be built. "The overriding need is the road," he says, while pledging that most of the land above it will be used for parks and promenades. Activists, however, have heard such claims before. Chu asks, "Who can trust the government?" and notes that the planned West Kowloon cultural district, will, if completed, offer millions of square meters of commercial and residential space—but it was zoned as a park when the land was first reclaimed in 1996.

The key issue now is to find a method and a platform on which the new mood can be turned into real plans. Constant lawsuits—a staple of Hong Kong life as well established as reclamation—won't do the trick. "You can't design a city in a courthouse," says Zimmerman. "We have policy constipation," remarks Sun Hung Kai's Nissim.

In Hong Kong, few policies move without the backing of the business community, which is why the formation of the Harbour Business Forum is important. Business leaders don't want to take over all plans for the harbor. But the Forum has already settled on four broad areas in which it wants the Hong Kong government's performance to improve, and it will release the details next month. The Forum's report will call for a single, omniscient harbor authority, and transparency in the planning of projects. At the same time, the group says there should be a bias toward developing the harbor with public spaces, and that the 2004 court ruling banning nearly all reclamation should be respected. "The strength of feeling about the harbor has become conspicuous," says one of the participants at last week's meeting. "The business community should use its resources, its skills, its position in the community to move things forward. An improved harbor would be good for business."

Make that good, too, for lunchtime diners, intrepid swimmers, artists, cocktail kings—heck, everybody.