

Building a greener Hong Kong

INTERVIEW WITH CARRIE LAM AND EDWARD YAU

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With little scope for expansion across its verdant, hilly terrain, Hong Kong has one of the highest population densities in the world; the 1.2 million people who live on Hong Kong Island are packed 16,000 per square kilometre. The population of the entire Special Administrative Region is seven million, with a density of around 6,000 people per square kilometre. Skyscrapers and temples, shopping malls and traditional markets sit cheek by jowl, while 1950s British trams weave through its noisy streets, grid-locked with luxury cars.

The city has grown rapidly over the last two decades, and property prices have risen to be among the highest in the world, fuelled by a frenzied construction boom that has seen ever-thinner, taller skyscrapers squeezed into ever-narrower spaces, but that fewer and fewer residents can afford to live in. Furthermore, the city's architectural heritage has been sacrificed in this scramble for new building land, and in the meantime, there are rising public concerns on our air and water pollution levels.

In short, Hong Kong has consolidated its position as a global financial capital, but life for most of its residents doesn't match the quality of that enjoyed by the inhabitants of London, New York, or Singapore.

Recognising the negative aspects of the boom

years, when Donald Tsang ran for Chief Executive in 2007, he made improving the city's quality of life the cornerstone of his election campaign.

Mr Tsang also made a commitment to tackle the growing gap between rich and poor, noting: "the financial analysts and investment bankers are getting very rich and very well rewarded while those at the grass roots remain where they are. Incomes are not falling but the gap is widening."

When Mr Tsang was putting his cabinet together he chose Carrie Lam to head the Development Bureau, which would be tasked with implementing many of the key strategies to bring Hong Kong into line with the world's leading cities by addressing long-term infrastructure and environmental issues. A go-to-person with a reputation for getting things done, Mrs Lam was Director of Social Welfare Department and Permanent Secretary for Housing, Planning and Lands, in addition to a stint as Director General at the Economic and Trade Office in London.

"If Hong Kong is to become like New York and London, then it must be not only in the financial aspects, not only in its visual appeal, but also by becoming far more interesting, unique, more diverse and so on, and that is what I have brought to my job as Secretary for Development," she says.

In the beginning of its term, the Government initiated the strategy of promoting growth through infrastructural development.

Capital works expenditure for 2011-12 will reach a record high of more than HK\$58 billion. A similar amount is expected to be spent annually on infrastructure over the coming years on 10 major infrastructure projects. Among them, the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge, the Hong Kong Section of the Guangzhou-Shenzhen-Hong Kong Express Rail Link and the Kai Tak Development Plan Stage 1 are underway. The Sha Tin to Central Link project was gazetted last November.

Other major projects expected to start in 2011-12 include the New Development Areas in the northern part of the New Territories, to relieve pressure on the housing market.

With no more than 1,100 square



Greener than you may think: this satellite photograph shows the proportion of protected parkland in Hong Kong

kilometres of land in total, of which, as Mrs Lam points out, around 24 per cent has been used for construction, and a further 46 per cent designated as park land that cannot be built on, the question is how to meet housing and office needs at a reasonable price.

“The solution is a brownfield approach,” says Mrs Lam. “Brownfield sites have tremendous potential in Hong Kong, because our economic cycles are so fast.” Hong Kong’s manufacturing has largely moved to the mainland since the 1980s, leaving behind a large stock of multi-story industrial buildings, covering something like 17 million square metres, all of it easily accessible; “that’s 1.7 times Hong Kong’s total office stock: if we can turn that into offices we can meet demand.”

Reflecting her concerns when she was in charge of Social Welfare, Mrs Lam has sought to address the widening income gap in Hong Kong, illustrated by the large stock of sub-standard housing in the city. “When I came into this job I realised that urban redevelopment was crucial, because our buildings were aging and because of the way these high-rise buildings are managed, maintenance was poor. So we were then seeing a lot of poorly maintained buildings in Hong Kong,” says Mrs Lam.

To address this problem, the Development Bureau has set up the Urban Renewal Authority (URA). The body is authorised to acquire land through compulsory purchase orders: “In the last 10 years it has carried out some 45 projects that have helped thousands of families to relocate to a better environment,” says Mrs Lam.

In contrast to the “we know best” policies of previous administrations, Mrs Lam’s Bureau is taking a consultative approach: “Talking to people directly at as early a stage as possible is a way to take things forward... in the last four years we have managed to build up a lot of trust with civic groups.”

In 2008, the URA began a two-year process to discuss strategies for urban renewal. The result is a three-stage approach based on public consultation that has produced seven major topics that residents want addressed, and that has seen a new strategy for urban renewal emerge.

Another indicator of a willingness to listen to residents is the new policy of offering people accommodation in new apartment blocks on the site of their former homes. Formerly, people whose properties were bought would have to move to another area. “We call it Flat for Flat. You give us the old flat and we promise a new flat of the same value. It means that we keep communities together.”

Parallel to these efforts have been

measures to improve Hong Kong’s water and air quality, as well as policies to ensure greater sustainability in building design and construction.

But as Environment Secretary Edward Yau explains, Hong Kong’s overall environment is closely related to activities in its immediate neighbourhood, the Pearl River Delta of Guangdong province, covering an area of more than 54,733 square kilometres and home to a population of around 47 million people, including a large migrant worker pool employed in export manufacturing.

Indeed, it is no longer possible to look at Hong Kong’s environment without understanding the close economic relations between the city and its surrounding region. Likewise, Hong Kong cannot survive environmentally without collaboration with its neighbours in a clean-up campaign.

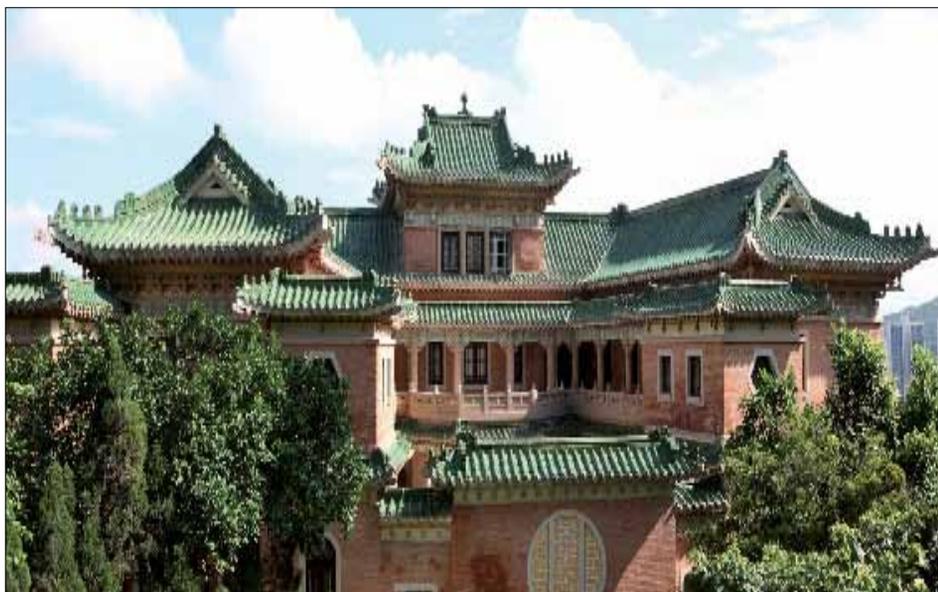
The beginnings of such cooperation have already started. But, as Mr Yau accepts, much more must be done and with a greater sense of urgency if both Hong Kong and the delta region are to avoid seriously damaging economic and public health consequences.

“Over the last decade we have tried to work hand in hand with the mainland authorities. Together as partners we set common targets where we commit to reduce the various sub-pollutants by a certain percentage, ranging from 20-55 per cent, depending on the individual pollutants,” he explains.

In conjunction with the mainland authorities, Mr Yau says that the idea is to create a Green Pearl River Delta Area, with a cluster of “liveable” cities. “We put our heads together to build a sustainable, low-carbon, low-pollution area and in so doing create healthy competition whereby various cities within this region are trying their best to outperform each other to be greener.”

There are signs that Hong Kong people’s demand for a clean-up may well spur more rapid addressing of environmental issues across the region

King Yin Lei: an outstanding testament to heritage conservation in Hong Kong



The first step the Development Bureau took when the present administration came into office was to issue a clear policy statement committing it to heritage conservation

He says that at regional level, the last five years has seen a nearly 47 per cent reduction in major pollutants such as SO₂, and about 14 per cent in the case of airborne particles, with a 7 per cent fall in nitrogen dioxides.

The Government is also encouraging residents to be more energy conscious, and to do even more to recycle. Around 50 per cent of municipal waste is already recycled.

“We are in the process of building an integrated waste management facility using new incineration technology, which could supply, for instance, electricity for 100,000 households and at the same time handling about 3,000 tonnes of waste which is about one-third of the disposable municipal waste on a daily basis,” he says.

Only around a third of household waste is recycled, but this is where Hong Kong’s population density is a strength, making it easier to collect refuse that has been separated.

Sustainable development will require the authorities

to cooperate much more deeply. From Hong Kong’s perspective, it is simply not possible for its environmental condition to improve substantially without improvements in its immediate neighbourhood. There are signs that Hong Kong people’s demand for a clean-up may well spur more rapid addressing of environmental issues across the region as a whole.

Meanwhile, at the local level, the Development Bureau has shown it is both willing and able to introduce policies and take action to improve the lives of Hong Kong residents in myriad smaller ways and by giving them a greater say in the decisions that affect them in everyday ways, as Carrie Lam points out:

“The government has realised that the time has come for us not to just concentrate on building. We also need to look at various aspects: conservation, environment and history, local culture, greening, if we are to provide a better living environment for the people of Hong Kong.”

A late convert to conservation

In her capacity as Secretary for Development, part of Carrie Lam’s remit is the conservation of Hong Kong’s built heritage.

Addressing the question has, she says, been a “steep learning curve,” adding that the outcry that followed the demolition of the historic Star Ferry Pier and Queen’s Pier in 2007 prompted her to take a much more consultative approach to urban renewal and protecting Hong Kong’s dwindling stock of historical buildings and landmarks.

The first step the Development Bureau took when the present administration came into office in 2007 was to issue a clear policy statement that would commit it, and future administrations, to heritage conservation. Then Mrs Lam began working with the Antiquities Advisory Board to advise her on endangered sites. Her aim has been to raise the threshold for a building to attain historic status.

“We copied the British system of applying grading to listed buildings,” she says. “Over the last five years we have carried out an inventory to grade the city’s buildings, and we now have some 1,444 buildings that are more than 50 years old.”

But in a city where land is at a premium, protecting what many of the island’s property developers simply see as “uninteresting old buildings” has proved a challenge, says Mrs Lam.

“Because the land is so very, very valuable in Hong Kong, and these privately-owned historic mansions are all in prime locations,” she says, citing Ho Tung Gardens as a prime example. After more than a year wrangling over the future of this

exquisite 1920s villa, complete with pagoda, the Government of Hong Kong invoked the Antiquities and Monuments Ordinance for the fourth time in history, declaring it “a proposed monument,” thus imposing a 12-month moratorium on redevelopment of the site. The talks continue.

Mrs Lam has scored some notable successes though. The Central Market is fine example of the modernist movement, built in 1939. It ceased operation in 2003, and was scheduled to be demolished and replaced with the ubiquitous skyscraper until Mrs Lam persuaded Donald Tsang to provide the area with some much needed space and greenery. It is now to be revitalised and used as a leisure and events space.

Similarly, the Development Bureau managed to save King Yin Lei, a mansion on Stubbs Road in Hong Kong’s Mid Levels. In 2007, the owner began deliberately damaging the delicately decorated building in a bid to have it declared unusable and demolished so that the site could be developed. Mrs Lam responded by having it declared a monument, and eventually negotiated a land swap with the owner, but not before he covered the cost of restoration and repairs.

Not that all Hong Kong’s property developers see no future in “old buildings”. Hullett House, in Kowloon’s Tsim Sha Tsui district, is an impressive example of what the private sector can do with a historic site. A magnificent white-stucco former police headquarters built in 1881, Hullett House is now one of the city’s chicest hotels.