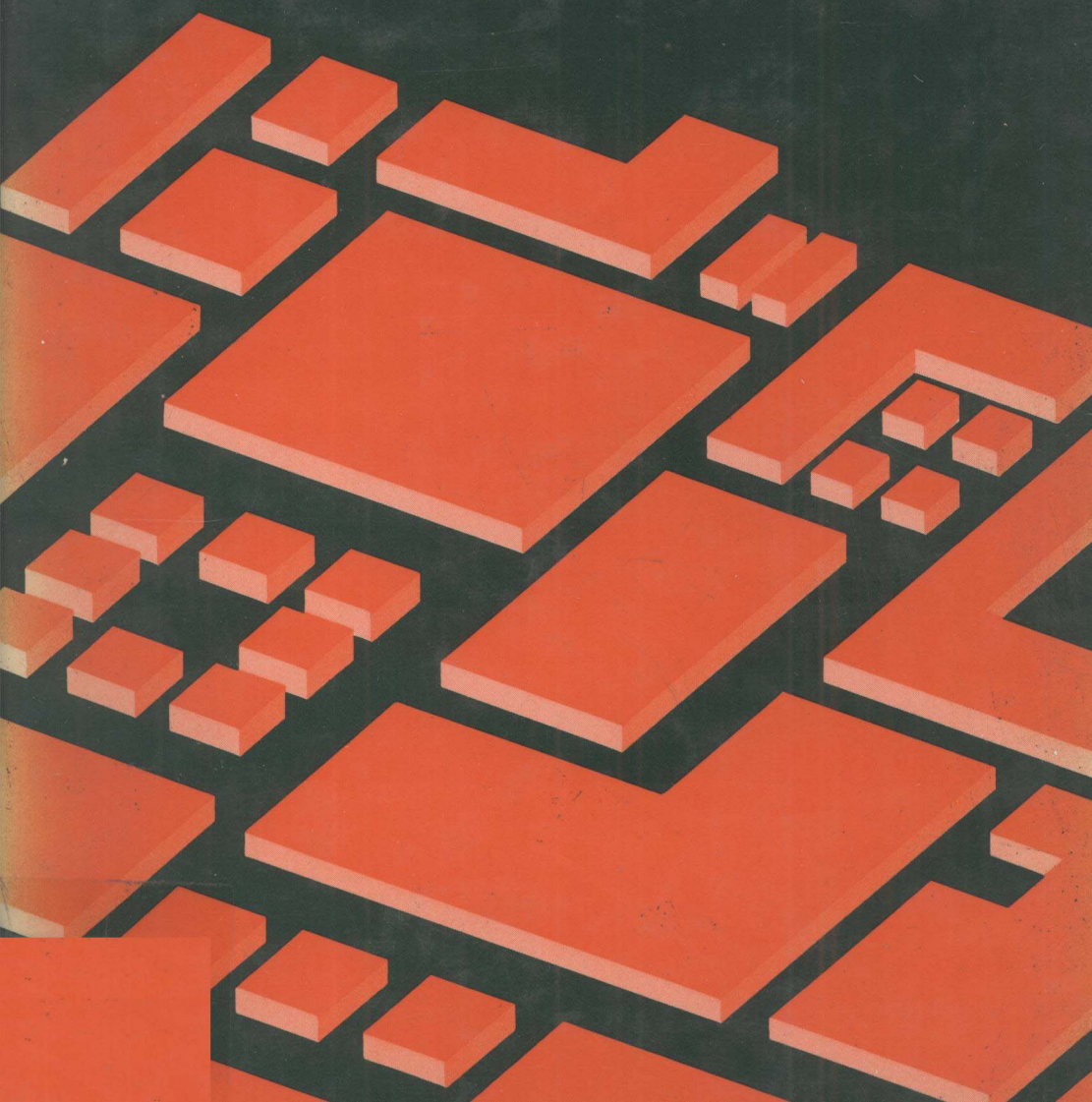


Land-use Planning in Hong Kong

History, Policies and Procedures

Roger Bristow



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HONG KONG, KOWLOON



ND THE NEW TERRITORIES





Frontispiece An aerial view of the northern shore of Hong Kong Island and Kowloon in 1981. The influence of past planning regimes can be clearly seen: the predominant vertical form of the buildings results from the 1955 Buildings Ordinance; the grid-iron street patterns (particularly in North Kowloon) date from the 1922 Town Planning Scheme; while the layout of much of the shoreline is a result of successive government reclamation schemes since the Colony's foundation (Hong Kong Series 25000/36764, 11-2-81, Crown Lands and Survey Photographic Unit, Hong Kong Government).

To Au Shu Kay

Preface

IT MAY perhaps seem unusual to begin a book about land-use planning in Hong Kong by asking such a deceptively simple question as 'What is town planning?' When this book was in preparation and other visitors to Hong Kong were asking me what I was doing during my visit, my invariable answer was 'trying to understand and learn about the town planning system in Hong Kong'. Their equally invariable reaction was a look of blank amazement coupled with the exclamation 'Is there any planning here?' It was evident that they had a clear notion in their own minds of what they expected the results of town planning to be, and that the evidence failed to meet their expectations. To be fair, their experience was mostly of the tourist heartland around the harbour, and relatively few knew of or had seen, for example, the scale of achievement in the new towns in the New Territories. To them the essence of the place was the apparent disorder and noisy congestion of the older city, and it was this that seemed alien to the planned and more orderly environments from which so many of them came.

People therefore have preconceptions about the nature of town planning. This is no less true of the professional planners and, for that matter, this author. Indeed, as the reader will discover, it is asserted here that town planning in Hong Kong is and has been almost entirely a reflection of the particular preoccupations, conceptions and biases of Hong Kong's professional planners and those in the government and the wider community who control them. This stems from a belief that while some may think that town planning is a neutral, technical design process — perhaps architecture or urban design on a larger scale — this view is erroneous. The very fact, as will be argued in the first chapter, that such a process must incorporate value judgements and be orientated to achieving some defined implicit or explicit objectives inevitably takes away any neutrality. Town planning can never be neutral in its effects and hence must always be political in its methods and objectives. After all, it often gives measurable benefits to some and imposes great costs on others.

There is, therefore, a clear administrative approach to studying the town planning processes set out in this book. There are also some other deliberate biases of which I am aware, and which should also be stated here. Firstly, the development history of Hong Kong has not been dealt with comprehensively. Rather I have tried to use that record, for which there is a large amount of original material, selectively. Secondly, some parts of the story have been

deliberately underplayed since they are well-covered elsewhere. General information on the Hong Kong Government and on housing policy are examples of this. In both instances, because good source and commentary material is available elsewhere, I have thought it proper to allow readers to make use of that, rather than repeat it here. In a sense this book, within its subject area, is an attempt to fill the gaps.

Miners, in his preface to *The Government and Politics of Hong Kong*, states that it is much easier to discover what the government is legally entitled to do than to investigate the actual extent of its influence over particular decisions. This observation applies as much to town planning as to government generally. Constraints on time alone have meant that I have had to rely largely on published works and public records, whether in Hong Kong or London. This book is therefore mainly a product of literature research and it may lack the additional insights of day-to-day experience, despite the active assistance of a large number of Hong Kong people both within and outside the Hong Kong Government whose help is noted in the Acknowledgements. Nevertheless, it is, I think, fair to say that the book's strength must lie, if anywhere, in its attempt to bring the world of documentation into wider view.

What follows is only an introduction to town planning in Hong Kong. The reality is altogether too complex and intricate to be fully understood in a brief space of time. It is a first step, and one which is sure to contain some misinterpretations and misunderstandings. I willingly take responsibility for these, since an author's opinions and biases remain his own. Of one thing I feel sure. I would always argue that a place, in the end, gets the environment that it deserves; or, to put it another way, if radical environmental change is desired, then for it to occur it must be backed by sufficient political will. I firmly believe that Hong Kong is no exception. The territory currently reflects the values that its community, past and present, has placed upon it: change will come about only because Hong Kong citizens themselves believe in it and have the will to bring it about. It is hoped that this book will help those who wish to bring about such change in that, by explaining the past and present town planning process in Hong Kong, it will give them some insight into how the future might be influenced more effectively.

Department of Town and Country Planning, ROGER BRISTOW
University of Manchester.
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1. What is Town Planning?

Introduction

TO ASK the question, 'What is town planning?', is one thing: to provide a conclusive answer is not quite so easy.

A non-professional, when asked what he thinks town planning is, will often talk of the design and quality of the environment in which he lives — the streets and buildings, the noise and congestion, the general activity and bustle of great cities everywhere. Somehow the town planner is thought of as controlling this intricate web of activity and in some way being responsible for it. Yet if we delve deeper, we find that the way in which such control is devised, and the reasons for it, are rarely understood. Hence, when it is asserted that planning has failed, or that, for example, there is little evidence of town planning in Hong Kong, few clearly understand why planners seem unable to meet public expectations. To understand the subject properly two things are necessary: a realization of what town planning is about and what it is trying to achieve, and a recognition of how such a process works, its limitations and its possibilities. We must therefore begin with an attempt to decide just what is meant by such terms as town or land-use planning, and try to place them within the context of Hong Kong.

Some might argue that town planning in Hong Kong is what the town planners, with that name and professional qualification, actually do. To a limited extent that is perfectly correct, but when we actually look at what 'they' do, we discover that simple observation of the process can only take us so far. What is done is unintelligible without knowledge or understanding of the values, means or objectives that lie behind what we observe. To understand these properly, we need to provide basic theoretical ideas and concepts as to how this particular aspect of our society works.

It is better to improve our understanding and our theories of planning before we put them into practice rather than afterwards... One may cite, for example, the unquestioned philosophical assumptions made by traffic planners who presumed that a better urban way of life might result by maximising urban mobility, and the naïve sociological assumption that led early new town planners to believe that they could create a sense of community by planning physically distinct neighbourhood areas.¹³

Regrettably, life is more complex than that. As Moore has said,² we must ensure that planners not only ask how to plan but also why they plan. If planned intervention in a private market economy cannot first be justified, then the question of how to plan is in any case superfluous; an important qualification, one might argue, for a territory with the economic philosophy of modern Hong Kong.

The Meaning of Planning

In a sense we can all say that at some time in our lives we plan. 'Planning is a process that involves making and evaluating each of a set of interrelated decisions before action is required, in a situation in which it is believed that unless action is taken a desired future state is not likely to occur, and that if appropriate action is taken, the likelihood of a favourable outcome can be increased,'³ or, to put it more succinctly, 'planning is a process of preparing a set of decisions for action in the future directed at achieving goals by optimal means.'⁴ Such descriptions can be applied to both the individual and organizations and governments. It is important, too, to note that plans have objectives which involve particular values — to change the future so as to bring about a situation which is in some way seen as being better. The idea of 'goals' is therefore fundamental to the concept of planning, however defined.

This has long been recognized. Nearly forty years ago, Hayek commented on the idea of planned societies:

The dispute between the modern planners and their opponents is not a dispute on whether we ought to choose intelligently between the various possible organisations of society; it is not a dispute on whether we ought to employ foresight and systematic thinking in planning our common affairs. It is a dispute about the best way of so doing. The question is whether for this purpose it is better that the holder of coercive power should confine himself in general to creating conditions under which the knowledge and initiative of individuals is given the best scope so that they can plan most successfully; or whether a rational utilisation of our resources requires central direction and organisation of all our activities according to some consciously constructed 'blueprint'.⁵

This is an argument about method: there is also an argument about motives and objectives. Webber notes,

I am aware of about two dozen rather different conceptions of planning, each of which is widely held. . . . Although not universally so, two common threads tie these multiple conceptions into a rather coherent meaning that most people may attach to the name 'planning'. They are. . . that some kinds of collective rationality can be effectively substituted for private rationality, and that social systems can be engineered

to conform to some collectively willed future state of affairs . . . I suppose the most commonly accepted notion of planning is something like . . . that organised societies can rationally and scientifically engineer future history, thus to guarantee Progress and to assure that the public interest will be served.⁶

Such a view of planning clearly implies, and indeed requires, a knowledge and use of basic assumptions about ideas, beliefs, actions and intentions — the world of the philosopher.

'Any plan [even a plan to perpetuate the status quo, or to do nothing] involves ethical assumptions and judgements of some kind — that it is "good" to do one thing rather than another . . . Such ethical judgements are made whenever planners identify problems which planning might seek to solve, and when they judge that one plan is "better" than another in the sense of its being just, fair, morally good'⁷ and so on. Thus when the Hong Kong Town Planning Ordinance speaks of the functions of the Town Planning Board as being performed 'with a view to the promotion of the health, safety, convenience and general welfare of the community',⁸ not only has it set out certain judgements by the government about particular areas of planning policy, but it also clearly envisages that the Board, as its agent, will make continuing judgements when determining policy criteria and applying them through its control of statutory land-use planning in Hong Kong. Even when other criteria such as economic cost or benefit are applied, though they may be more easily measurable than intangibles like social values, they too are, ultimately, ethical judgements which have to be made in order to operate the decision process by which planned intervention takes place, and by which plans come to be implemented. Planners also seek to improve their knowledge of problems. This too involves philosophical judgements — this time about what constitutes 'valid' knowledge or 'truth'. Thus within judgements we have to differentiate between facts and values — factual knowledge and ethical or normative statements.

This is a fundamental division. Mixture of the two, whether intentional or unintentional, spells danger; both to those who plan, and for the understanding and well-being of those who are being planned for. This is not to say that value judgements and facts should not be mixed, for often values are based upon other earlier, more fundamental judgements, some of which may be factual. The test of their soundness is as much by the use of rational logic within normative judgements as within factual reasoning. In short, facts and values are inseparable. More rigorously it can be put that 'scientific planning is a mirage. Science has nothing to say about which valued ends ought to be sought, but that is of course the very stuff of planning. Selecting among alternative ends is amongst the toughest planning tasks we face, and yet there is nothing in the apparatus of science — or of engineering — that can make those valuative choices for us.'⁹ It may give us the means but it does not determine the ends. 'It is almost a mark of the trade for planners to tell others what ought to be. However, these sorts of assertion are necessarily based in

ideology, personal opinion, group interest, or, at best, in wisdom bred of the personal knowledge that comes with extensive experience. Unfortunately, neither planners nor anybody else have technical knowledge about what *should* happen, in the sense that scientists may have technical or theoretic bases for saying what *might* happen. Goals and objectives are extra-scientific kinds of statements.¹⁰ Moreover, we do not yet know enough about the workings of social systems to be able to say authoritatively what might be done to determine such a desired state. Even if we did, there remains the question of who is to formulate the goals that the planning process is to serve? To say that society should do so is too easy: in the end it must be people who take such decisions, however organized or selected, and if planning is ever to be acceptable and accepted then the age-old question of who plans and for whom has to be faced and answered.

Land-use Planning: A Derivative

Professional planners find themselves confined, for the most part, to the task of defining and attempting to achieve a 'successful' ordering of the built environment. In the ultimate instance the planner is concerned with the 'proper' location, the appropriate mix of activities in space, of all [the] diverse elements which make up the totality of physical structures — the houses, roads, factories, offices, water and sewage disposal facilities, hospitals, schools, and the like — which comprise the built environment. From time to time the spatial ordering of the built environment is treated as an end sufficient unto itself and some form of environmental determinism takes hold. At other times this ordering is seen as a reflection rather than a determinant of social relations and planning is seen as a process rather than as a plan — and so the planner heaves himself away from the drawing board to attend meetings with bankers, community groups, land developers, and the like, in the hope that a timely intervention here or a preventative measure there may achieve a 'better' overall result. But 'better' assumes some purpose which is easy enough to specify in general, but more difficult to particularise about. As a physical resource complex created out of human labour and ingenuity, the built environment must primarily function to be useful for production, circulation, exchange and consumption. It is the job of the planner to intervene in the production of this complex composite commodity and to ensure its proper management and maintenance. But this poses immediately the question useful or better for what and to whom?¹¹

This is a question which we have just raised and one which ultimately begs an ideological answer.

We live, after all, in a society which, for want of a better phrase, is founded on capitalist principles of private property and market exchange, a society which presupposes certain basic social relationships with respect to production, distribution and consumption which themselves must be reproduced if the social order is to survive.¹²