



## Social order, leisure, or tourist attraction? The changing planning missions for waterfront space in Hong Kong



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### ABSTRACT

Urban waterfronts gain more attention in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. While waterfront uses are often contested between the government and the community, the literature suggests that economic and property interests generally play significant roles in waterfront redevelopment. Relatively less emphasis is found in the literature to perceive the waterfront as a place for leisure and recreation. This study examines the changing missions for the Victoria Harbour waterfront in Hong Kong. Three epochs of harbour waterfront planning and development are discussed. It argues that leisure and recreational functions are provided in an auxiliary manner in all the three periods of waterfront development. The 19<sup>th</sup> century Praya aimed at enhancing social order, improving harbour appearance, and providing public access. The 20<sup>th</sup> century waterfront faced a competing demand between a place for tourism and a place for local people. The contemporary waterfront is further transformed under a selective logic, bringing tourists to the inner harbour waterfront and pushing local recreational needs to the outer harbour waterfront. The harbour waterfront is gradually emerging into a festival market type waterfront.

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### Introduction

The potential of waterfront areas as vibrant urban space gains more and more attention among cities towards the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The terminology “waterfront” refers to a broad range of definitions, depending on the landscape and environmental settings of urbanity. Riverfront (Ahmad, 2000; Steinberg, 2007), harbour-front (Gordon, 1996, 1997a; Jensen, 2007), lakefront (Keating, Krumholz, & Wieland, 2005; Wen, Bu, & Qjn, 2014), lake regions (Mireri, Atekyereza, Kyessi, & Mushi, 2007), coastal zones (Joseph, Wang, & Wang, 2014; León & March, 2014; Norman, 2009), and beaches (Cervantes, Espejel, Arellano, & Delhumeau, 2008; Villares, Roca, Serra, & Montori, 2006) are some common descriptions about waterfront development.

Characterised by their capacity to provide breath-taking scenic view and transport convenience, waterfront areas are often used to facilitate multiple land-use functions and achieve city planning and government objectives in different stages of development (Follmann, 2015; Kear, 2007). Recent research on waterfront development often focuses on the issue of redeveloping or

revitalizing waterfront for satisfying contemporary social needs. Dialogues between institutions and communities in contesting waterfront urban spaces from the social-economic and the socio-political perspectives cover the two main streams of waterfront research respectively (e.g., Bunce & Desfor, 2007; Chang & Huang, 2011; Gunay & Dokmeci, 2012; Hoyle, 1999; Jauhainen, 1995; Lehrer & Laidley, 2008; Sandercock & Dovey, 2002; Vayona, 2011).

Utilizing waterfront areas for a mix of recreational activities with other economic uses is one commonly used development strategy in contemporary cities. Yet such perception of waterfront usage is neither uniquely tied to the government nor the public. While the government, collaborating with the developers, is often attracted by the economic benefits in redeveloping waterfront spaces, the public is concerned about how waterfront development can address social needs and increase community benefits. Through investigating four cases of waterfront redevelopment from New York, London, Boston and Toronto, Gordon (1997b) delineates the political competition between the redevelopment agencies and the waterfront residents. Waterfront redevelopments, as Gordon observed, are often initiated by the coalition of governments and private sectors under economic considerations. Towards the developmental phase, however, local governments often shift from focusing on economic concerns to considering a more evenly redistributive approach of accommodating residents' needs.

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Jones (1998) reviews the contemporary waterfront regeneration projects in the U.S. and the U.K. to provide insights for future waterfront developments. Generally adopting a development mix model, the waterfront projects in the U.S. in the 1980s were regenerated under a residential-leisure approach. Orchestrated with regular festivals and events, these 'festival market' type waterfronts were designed to embrace private residences, retail sectors, leisure activities and open areas for special events. Observing a more preservationist approach in waterfront projects in built heritages and environmental ecologies in the U.K. in the 1990s, Jones recommends a more balanced waterfront regeneration strategy, considering both economic and social objectives while integrating environmental policies. He also insists on building people-oriented waterfronts instead of festival market place. Public inspirations on waterfront recreational usage can even go beyond the formal waterfront design. Campo (2002) reviews the scope and magnitudes of informal uses of waterfront areas in Brooklyn, New York City. Facilitating an unmonitored environment free from consumerist spirits and conventional rules, the unplanned and design-free waterfront areas are regarded as fertile grounds to embrace 'vernacular' activities, such as art shows, concerts, and community gatherings. These studies unanimously suggest a departure from the mentality of either the governments or the private sectors in utilizing waterfront solely for recreational functions.

The transforming notions of waterfront areas for recreational space in Hong Kong are studied in this paper. Viewing from a planning perspective, this paper examines the changing understanding of waterfront functions for leisure and recreation based upon three stages of harbour-front development of the Victoria Harbour, a natural water channel and now an iconic landmark situated at the heart of Hong Kong. The first incident discusses the proposal of Bowring Praya development in the 1850s. The second incident focuses on the discussion of the Abercrombie Report on harbour development and tourism in the late 1940s, and the Bernacchi's Motion on developing Wan Chai Gloucester Road Waterfront in the 1950s. The third incident discusses the intended uses of the Victoria Harbour and its waterfront areas in the latest planning study. Through examining the rhetoric and visions of waterfront and its potential as recreational space, this paper argues that leisure and recreational functions served merely the auxiliary functions of the Victoria harbour-front areas. Harbour-front was initially an implementation site for political agendas in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. During that time, Waterfront Praya had the main objectives of establishing social order, creating iconic attraction, as well as enhancing public access. These objectives all promoted an image of "good" government and contributed to the stability of colonial governance. The 20<sup>th</sup> century waterfront was contested between the notions of

waterfront for tourism and the people's waterfront. Competition of planning ideas focused on whether waterfront should be developed into an integrated site, intertwining tourism, leisure, recreation, and amusement, or an open space dedicated to local people. The 21<sup>st</sup> century waterfront sharpens its emphasis on tourist waterfront, while shifting local needs for recreational waterfront space to the peripheral areas. Stressing on promoting tourist activities, embroidering the Harbour as unique attraction, and providing retail, leisure and recreational activities, harbour-front space is portrayed as a tourist festival place. By showing a historical trajectory of waterfront redevelopment strategy compared to the Western experience, this paper illustrates that the waterfront transformation of Hong Kong has great implications to the waterfront redevelopment in Asia and other parts of the world.

### Building an ordered colony: the Bowring Praya development, 1868–1873

The Victoria Harbour is a natural harbour separating Hong Kong Island and Kowloon Peninsula. The colony of Hong Kong was established by the British Government in 1842, following the 1<sup>st</sup> Opium War and the signature of the Treaty of Nanjing between the British and the Qing Government. In the 1840s, the colony consisted of only the hilly Hong Kong Island; the Kowloon Peninsula did not join the colony until the Convention of Peking in 1860. Utilizing Hong Kong as a base for re-exporting trade with China, British and foreign merchants began to set up Far East headquarters in Hong Kong. Relying on the harbour-front areas to load supplies and goods on and off trading ships, the harbour-front areas were originally acquired by merchants as offices and warehouses for cargo loading purposes.

An urgent need of developable land through sea reclamation was deemed necessary under the rapid economic growth from the 1840s to 1860s. To obtain more developable land in the harbour-front areas, the government launched the first reclamation scheme back in the 1850s and since then subsequent reclamation projects have been implemented (Mak, 2008). The first major reclamation program, the First Praya Reclamation Scheme, was proposed in 1855. Merchants who possessed lands and private piers at the waterfront reacted with strong objections to the scheme. The objections were able to only delay the reclamation and construction work were eventually carried out from 1859 to 1867 (Ho, 2004: 36). Apart from adding new vacant lands between the old shoreline and the new waterfront, a new Praya, which was referred to as a waterfront promenade, constituted the major part of the Reclamation Scheme.

The purposes and motives of the massive reclamation project were well spelt out in the Government Notification No. 53 of the Hongkong Government Gazette in 1855. The notification delineated in explicit terms the intended site of reclamation, the future design of the Bowring Praya (named after Governor John Bowring, in office from 1854 to 1859), and most importantly, the justifications of reclamation and Praya construction besides creating new vacant lands. Prepared by Colonial Secretary William Thomas Mercer, the notification showed a strong desire of the colonial government in initiating the reclamation and refusing the objections.

Several implications are revealed in the waterfront project. First, waterfront was re-designed for both private and public access. Owing to the overwhelming ownership of seafront land lots by the merchants, the waterfront before reclamation could be regarded as mainly dedicated for private commercial uses. The colonial government, under the setting of the Scheme, intended to reallocate the rights to waterfront access back to the public. As given in the Notification by Mercer, both private and public piers should be built at the waterfront, say between every *four* houses, with house-boats



Fig. 1. Praya circa 1868–1872. Originally printed in Thomson, J. (1874) *Illustrations of China and its people*: a series of two hundred photographs, with letterpress descriptive of the places and people represented.

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