Land Use Policy 76 (2018) 157–165

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Land Use Policy

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/landusepol

Quality of life in a "high-rise lawless slum": A study of the "Kowloon Walled City"

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Kowloon Walled City
Quality of life
Builders
Housing unit
Life satisfaction

ABSTRACT

Informed by the 'quality of life' model with specific reference to Chinese culture, this article uses reliable and publicly available information seldom used in historical or heritage study to identify the designs of flats and builders of the "Kowloon Walled City" (hereafter the City) and reliable oral testimonies to refute some myths about the quality of life within it. This settlement has been notoriously misrepresented by some as a city of darkness that was razed from the face of the Earth before 1997 to fulfill a pre-war dream of the colonial government. This article confirms the view that this extremely short-lived concrete jungle, mystified as a horrifying, disorderly-built, and unplanned territory, was a product of un-organised small builders that had been hitherto unreported. The layout and designs of the housing units were different from that prescribed by the *Buildings Ordinance*, but were, in fact, developed within a consciously planned boundary that was a result of international politics. Although the City's overall built environment was poor due to a lack of natural light penetration, the designs of its individual flats were comparable, if not better than, typical units in contemporary public rental housing blocks, many of which had to be demolished less than 20 years after their construction due to structural defects. This article uses the 'quality of life' model, which has hitherto been limited to medical and social, rather than historical or anthropological, studies, to evaluate how design and housing satisfaction affected City residents' quality of life.

1. Introduction: some popular myths about "Kowloon Walled City" as an anarchy

There are two famous places that have been wrongly used as examples in class to showcase the effects of complete laissez faire: Houston and the "Kowloon Walled City" (the City). The former was praised as being "un-zoned," while the latter was condemned as an example of the ill effects of complete anarchy. The reality is that Houston has been "privately zoned," which is an accurate, but, rather un-libertarian, expression that was used to refer to Milwaukee before Siegan's work on Houston appeared. The latter was actually the outcome of rational maximization subject to clearly delineated boundaries of a settlement without a subdivision plan (Lai and Hansley Chua, 2017). This article probes the "quality of life" of the dwellers of what Girard and Lambot (2014) called a "City of Darkness."

To set the scene, there is a need to remove some general misunderstandings of the City, the first of which is that it was completely *unplanned and ignored* by the colonial government due to an international dispute between China and Britain over the jurisdiction of this former Qing (Ch'ing) Dynasty fort. It is a common misconception that the City was not subject to any government control or service. Although the enclave's political sensitivity meant that "municipal regulations were more often merely suggested than enforced" (Girard and Lambot, 2014, p.104), the government imposed tight sanctions against excessive building heights on the grounds of aviation safety (as Kai Tak Airport was located nearby), provided postal service to, and curbed drug trafficking in the settlement (Lai and DeGolyer, 2018).

The second myth is that the City became a dense, high-rise concrete jungle almost immediately following the Second World War and lasted until it was demolished in 1993. Saywell alleged that taller structures, once profit margins could be achieved, predominated during the "latter part of the 1950s and early '60s" and that the City "had filled out to its maximized form" by the 1970s (Saywell, 2014, p.118).

Neither is historically accurate. Research on the planning for the City, based on archival materials, revealed that the colonial and Chinese Governments actively planned its development and controlled its final built form (Lai et al., 2017). The colonial government tightly controlled the horizontal and vertical boundaries of every building

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landusepol.2018.04.047
Received 1 February 2018; Received in revised form 23 April 2018; Accepted 23 April 2018
Available online 10 May 2018

there, rendering the resultant structure a rough cubical mass with its outermost boundaries more or less limited within the thicker old walls of this former fort.

The image of the City, as popularly propagated and socially constructed, presumes a certain way of delineating its "true boundaries," which is a fertile research area awaiting further and better analysis. The official post-war policy was to confine its boundaries within the alignment of the original stone walls of the main fort on lower grounds, while ignoring a triangular uphill portion defined by two thin walls and the northern wall of the main fort (Lai, 2016). All of the City's walls were cannibalised by the Japanese occupiers during the war to expand Kai Tak Aerodrome using prisoners of war as labour.

This official policy was concretised by the construction of Tung Tau Tsuen Road (東頭村道) to the north, Carpenter Road to the south, Junction Road to the west, and Tung Tsing Road (東正道) to the east. The 'Nunnery Scheme' was a plan approved in 1969 by the Director of Public Works to surround this policy of the City, which was encircled by these four roads with developments on all four sides including a high-rise, low-cost public housing estate built by the Resettlement Department. This was intended to encourage residents of the City to surrender their land rights in exchange for governmental rental flats (Lai, 2016).

The iconicity of the City as a high-rise concrete mass was, in fact, just a short 20-year phenomenon that emerged during the early 1970s and disappeared completely by 1994, as evidenced by aerial photographs (Lai et al., 2017). These 20-odd years were just a brief moment in the City's 147-year history from 1847, when the fort was completed, to the final clearance of its housing blocks in 1994. As can be seen from aerial photos and government documents at the Public Records Office (PRO), the City comprised low-rise squatter huts well into the 1960s and its transition from "village houses" to high-rise apartment blocks built of reinforced concrete began only around 1970.

The concept quality of life is frequently found in sociological (urban ecology) and medical (community health) research using questionnaire surveys of some commonly agreed or asserted criteria as in the ranking of world cities. This article applies the concept to land development using archival materials and oral testimonies to fathom the satisfaction of residents living in a particular neighbourhood. It posits that satisfaction with the different features of the neighbourhood (particularly social and physical) affected different domain satisfactions, which, in turn, affected life satisfaction (Sirgy and Cornwell, 2012). As a residential settlement, the City provided its habitants with a higher quality of life than their previous dwellings, as the authors will demonstrate in the following interviews they conducted with former residents.

There is no universally accepted definition of 'quality of life' and the authors' research mainly focused on an extensive range of topics including individual physical and mental health, well-being, satisfaction, family, work, housing, social relations, political and cultural lives, and social ethics, amongst others (Chan et al., 2005, p.260). This article will, therefore, assess the quality of life of City residents and their respective satisfaction with its housing, the surrounding neighbourhood, and community via the designs of its units, with the aim of dispelling the City's often misinterpreted 'City of Darkness' image. This attempt to probe the actual conditions of the City is significant because even most people familiar with Hong Kong think the City was lawless in the sense that it featured huge, if not complete, rent dissipation due to a Hobbesian state of affairs with an un-imaginable harsh living environment. How bad was the situation? That the high-rise "slum" involved sophisticated real estate construction suggests that complete rent dissipation was entirely out of question. But it still opens up the question regarding the quality of life.

The article will also reflect on the doctrines of modern architecture earlier in the 20th Century, particularly the discourses on form and function. Overall, it can be argued that the City was a highly-functional settlement to live in. In 1923, noted modern architect Le Corbusier (1986) famously proclaimed that, "a house is a machine for living in" in his influential book, *Vers une Architecture* (Towards a New Architecture). His early designs included the Villa Savoye (1928-31) in France – noted for its open floor plan, functional roof, and continuous horizontal window strip, which were elements in his "Five Points of New Architecture" (Le, 1986). This is considered a prototype for functional architecture. In 1933, during the fourth meeting of CIAM (*Congrès internationaux d'architecture modern*, formed in 1928) in Athens, participating members of the international Modern Movement discussed issues that defined a functional approach to modern city planning (Somer et al., 2007). Interestingly, an earlier meeting in 1930 had a theme of 'rational lot development', which included Le Corbusier's notion of increasing building densities and fellow architect Walter Gropius' (1883–1969) proposal of 'high land utilization'. Both architectonic elements were evident in the City (Mumford, 2002). There is a good reason to bring to light urbanism, as urbanists promoted functional living much earlier. It is, therefore, interesting to compare the proposals informed by functionalism and 'rational lot planning' during the early 20th Century with what actually happened in the City to reflect the correspondence of theory to reality. The following sections will continue to discuss the City in light of the above conceptual model and contexts of urbanism in modern architecture.

2. The quality of life model applied to a Chinese environment

"Quality of life" is measured around the world using various scales from nations down to cities. Nowadays, these statistics are often used to promote a city for economic development. These aspects for determining the quality of life for a locale can also help measure the happiness in and satisfaction with it (Rogerson, 1999, p.979). In 1995, Bowling conducted a study on what constituted the most important aspects of life for people living in Britain and found that the top three aspects were relationships with family or relatives followed by one's own health (or that of a significant other) and one's finances or standard of living, including housing (Bowling, 1995, p.1451). The survey also revealed that out of 12 aspects, environmental aspects such as noise, safety, and cleanliness were ranked the least important in determining one's quality of life. In other words, Bowling's survey showed that satisfaction with a surrounding environment was not as important to the average Briton's overall happiness as his/her living quarters. Since the 1960s, the 'quality of life' concept became an extensively discussed subject across academic domains and developed into a major concern of the public, as well as for governments worldwide (Andrews, 2005; Diener and Rahtz, 2000; Veenhoven, 2000).

The concept of quality of life also has a long history in research on Hong Kong, which could be traced, for instance, to the work of Newcombe et al. (1978) and has been applied by several Hong Kong social scientists to housing affordability, unemployment, and the environment, amongst other domains, to form a "Quality of Life Index" (Chan et al., 2005). More recently, the Asian Urban-Wellbeing Indicators was launched by a think-tank in Hong Kong to measure how much people cared about and were satisfied with ten different policy domains including housing, education, environmental protection, community and belonging, etc. Its first report was published in 2016 (Lai et al., 2016).

In this context, there is a particular reason to study the City as a Chinese settlement because "existing research studies on quality of life are predominantly conducted in the West and there is a strong need to conduct quality of life research in different Chinese communities" (Shek, 2010:357). Because Hong Kong has such a high urban density, many have made explicit reference to the City in terms of *quality of life*. Examples include Kwok (1991); Chu and Uebegang (2002), Smart (2001), Cox (2004), Zhu (2004), Chow (2012), Lau and Yeung Sunnie (2013), and Lehmann (2016). Most of these authors condemned the City for its poor quality of life and/or high density (Kwok, 1991;Lau and Yeung Sunnie, 2013; Lehmann, 2016). None actually reported its