

URBAN DESIGN OF THE CENTRAL WATERFRONT

On behalf of the inter-professional Hong Kong Urban Design Alliance (comprising representatives from HKIP, HKIA, HKILA, and AIA (HK Branch)).

Submission to the Legco Subcommittee on Harbourfront Planning (the Subcommittee) of the Panel on Development.

1. The Process of Consultation

The outcome of the Urban Design Study for the New Central Harbourfront and Stage 2 Public Engagement is extremely disappointing.

Overall the process of public consultation has been very poor for the following reasons:

- Government's brochure is entitled 'Consultation Digest'. The Foreword uses the term 'public engagement'. There is in fact a major difference. Consultation is to seek advice, information or approval from; Engagement is the state of being involved in something. The entire process so far has not involved any proper public engagement, nor a proper engagement with professional bodies;
- Views had to be submitted to June 10th 2008. Some 17 months later we have had no proper feedback on the views expressed, possibly exemplifying the fact that there is no clear way to reconcile all views or even weight the views from those who are really knowledgeable and involved. It is far from clear what the 'clear aspirations' described in the Foreword actually are – there is mention of 'green and quality open space', 'sustainable design', and a 'respect for heritage' all of which are ambiguous in the context of the proposals put forward;
- Many very critical comments were expressed by professional bodies and experts, including those from the UDA, HKIA and HKILA that seem to have been ignored completely; and
- Government has simply announced that with very minor changes, a plan has been finalized that is evidently deemed to satisfy and reconcile public and professional comments.

2. Specific Comments

2.1 For this extremely important site in the central part of the harbour, the basis of plan preparation should not be an Outline Zoning Plan which serves another purpose entirely. Attempting to superimpose an exhilarating urban design framework on this, compromises planning and design opportunities from the outset. No other major waterfront in the world has adopted such a restrictive and compromised approach.

2.2 A perceived requirement for a large amount of public open space appears in a range of forms (ferry plaza, featured plaza, waterfront event plaza, amphitheatre, outdoor theatre, waterfront related leisure facility etc), but in total adds up to neither coherency nor definition. Thus the 'urban design' plan represents a collection of independent buildings and spaces, giving them a nominal function and claiming in a quite misleading way that this will achieve character, harmony, diversity and vibrancy.

2.3 In practice, Government has chosen to make the main issue as being whether the public prefer Queen's Pier by the Harbour or at the original location. This has effectively transferred the debate over the urban design as a whole, and its workability, to a somewhat minor issue. Even then there has been substantial disagreement over this aspect and its outcome.

2.4 We disagree with Government's assertion that their proposal projects a distinctive identity, creates an attractive and vibrant harbourfront, ensures a sustainable design, creates a harmonious visual and physical relationship, or respects the cultural and historical context. While the waterfront PTI has been removed, an excessive amount of ground level space is dedicated to vehicular transport, and there is little

that is harmonious in terms of the relationship between building groups and open space. More to the point, the overall ground level environment is almost completely devoid of place-making characteristics, or the capacity of the proposed fabric to evolve as such. Taken as a whole, the massing of buildings across the site is poor – there is little in terms of a waterfront activity edge, and little built definition of urban spaces or streetscape.

2.5 There is little in terms of a defined urban framework and virtually no sense of place – there is instead a large amount of empty landscaped spaces with little spatial definition, unity or coherence. The four 'principal design corridors' as set out will not achieve what is claimed for them. The 'Statue Square Corridor' constitutes a confusing series of pedestrian links at various levels; the 'Civic Corridor' is in effect a 'large public space' related to the Government Office Complex (although this is an integral part of the design that is already committed), and the 'Arts and Cultural Precinct' adjacent to the HKAPA and 'Visual Arts Education Centre' will not in any way become 'a unifying public space for various arts and cultural venues'. A range of poorly defined plazas, amphitheatre, outdoor theatre etc are themselves abstract elements set within empty space. These do not in any way form nodal attractions that will enhance vitality or unify the development as claimed. A large part of the core harbourfront area is effectively sterilized because of the PLA Pier which will, in practice, be little used.

2.6 We are pleased to see that the majority of the GFA associated with the two tall buildings on the waterfront in front of IFC have been removed to an alternative site. However this still leaves 6 storey structures on an island site adjacent to the ferry piers that is unsatisfactory. What this will actually constitute and how this complex will relate to the adjoining area is unknown. It would be far better to abandon this site for development altogether, and concentrate on open space and gathering areas at ground level, with additional development to add distinctive image to the ferry piers as a 'gateway' from the harbour. Precisely how the transfer of GFA to the alternative site will be satisfactorily accommodated in terms of the overall spatial quality is unknown.

2.7 In practice the pedestrian framework is very coarse grained, mainly linking spaces rather than activity nodes. The main N-S route from Central to Star Ferry is an elevated deck remote from adjoining development, while this joins to an underground link beneath Connaught Road. Opportunities proposed by the UDA for a more fine-grained and permeable framework mainly at grade, with a well defined esplanade between Central and Star Ferry concourse, have not been taken up.

2.8 What Government describes as a 'greening plan' is not a network – it is an amalgam of 'strategy zones' given definition by fanciful descriptions such as 'Seaside Verdure', 'Culture and Floral Park', 'Song Birds and Fragrance Park', 'Exotic Floral Park' etc that are more appropriate to a Botanical Garden. For such an extremely important waterfront area in a high density city with a potentially massive number of visitors, this is entirely the wrong emphasis. What is required is a framework of defined urban spaces, plazas, courts and pedestrian precincts linked to pedestrian streets and connecting elements.

2.9 The revised government proposals are conspicuously silent on the Vent Building that is to be constructed in conjunction with the Central and Wan Chai By Pass. The facility is likely to be physically large and of a significant height (i.e. of a scale similar to that of the vent buildings associated with the Western Harbour Crossing). The height of the facility may well be greater than the podium associated with 2 IFC. The facility is required to vent exhaust fumes from the tunnel section of the Central and Wan Chai By Pass. The facility is likely to have a number of significant associated impacts.

The present Vent Building location is likely to create significant and possibly harmful environmental impacts within what is intended to be a world class waterfront. The environs of the present site (immediately north of Two IFC) are intensively used by the public. The installation of the vent building would significantly affect

public use and enjoyment of the waterfront. It is important that the present proposals are outlined to the public and that alternatives are developed that would not prejudice public access to and enjoyment of the waterfront and the existing and proposed buildings within it.

2.10 The UDA has made strenuous efforts over almost two years to hold meetings and make responses to consultation documents on the Central harbourfront, using the time and involvement of voluntary professionals. It also prepared an alternative scheme that met all of Government's own principles and criteria, in a much more satisfactory way, and to better meet the TPB's requirement "To make Victoria Harbour attractive, vibrant, accessible and symbolic of Hong Kong – a harbour for the people and a harbour of life". Our design proposals were also fully responsive to the principles laid down by the Harbour Enhancement Committee. The UDA scheme has precisely the same amount of built gross floor area and public open space as Government's scheme, but is distributed in a more people-friendly and 'place-making' way.

The UDA proposal genuinely establishes a visionary and an articulate urban design framework by generating a dynamic waterfront, retaining and restoring historic elements of the city, including Queen's Pier and Star Ferry Clock Tower, integrating commercial anchor hotel and service apartments, with restaurants and alfresco dining, creating well defined civic spaces, opportunity to celebrate arts and culture, and axes which establish a permeable fine-grained urban fabric.

There are also three other innovative ideas that have been wholeheartedly supported when the UDA scheme has been presented at public meetings, that have been ignored without comment or explanation. The first is an Inner Harbour for recreation and leisure uses to extend the area of waterfront without contravening the Harbour Protection Ordinance; the second is a Maritime Museum incorporating its own marine basin, with a landscaped Eco Park over extended decks above the maze of at grade road connections adjacent to the APA; and the third is to make better public use of the area alongside the 200m length dedicated to the PLA Pier.

3.0 Conclusion

The current urban design plans for the Central Harbourfront represent a very poor compromise to traffic expediency. Above all the plan as it stands exemplifies the inadequacy of the existing planning system in its ability to achieve good urban design. Outline Zoning Plans, while they have for long served an important role in land management, should not be used as the basis for crucially important urban sites. No other world class waterfront has been conceived and planned in this way. Since the start of this exercise around 4 years ago design and planning opportunities have been unnecessarily compromised because of this.

In practice there were, at the beginning of this exercise, few real constraints to producing a world-class urban design framework on the Central harbourfront. Government's adamantness several years ago that the gazetted OZP should form the basis for an urban design solution has been seriously flawed. It has led to an extremely poor plan that will seriously compromise future design efforts to make this a world class waterfront. It is simply not good enough for Government to claim that it meets TPB and HEC objectives, when it is clear to experienced urban designers that this is simply not the case.

The process itself which, with a 'consultation' period alone that has stretched over 18 months, has produced virtually perhaps only two amendments to the original option(s). Moreover there has been no meaningful response by Government as to the constructive criticism and proposals put forward by professional groups.

At a time when the harbour, arguably Hong Kong's most valuable asset exemplifying the very identity of the city, is subject to detailed studies in a number of areas, there is still no strategic plan for the harbour itself.

The West Kowloon Cultural District – an equally important site, is being planned and designed in a completely different way to Central, and this might well indicate an alternative overall approach.

Proposals in the recent Policy Address for conservation proposals in Central (including the removal of the proposed tall waterfront buildings) have been made in something of a planning vacuum, with little overall relationship between preservation of historic monuments, current urban renewal proposals and waterfront planning. This is also a missed opportunity. It is arguably Hong Kong's last opportunity in core Central to re-direct planning and urban design emphasis in a comprehensive and co-ordinated way. It is also the final opportunity to achieve a harbourfront alongside the Central and Wan Chai foreshore that will exemplify the character and identity of the city. We see great examples of waterfront planning and development in many cities, and increasingly in Chinese cities. If we are to term Hong Kong 'Asia's World City' we need to back this up by a world class approach to harbourfront design as stated in the 'Integrated Harbour Vision and Delivery Plan set out by the Harbour Business Forum in November 2009.