

10 December 2005

CB(1)511/05-06(10)

The Chairman
Legislative Council Panel
on Planning, Lands and Works
Legislative Council Secretariat
3/F, Citibank Tower
3 Garden Road, Central
Hong Kong.

Attention: the Clerk to the Panel, Ms Shiu

Dear Sir

Re: Submission about Development in Central and the Tamar Site

I have lived in Hong Kong since 1992 - it is my home and only home (I own my own flat and have always lived and worked in the Central/Sheung Wan area). I run an art gallery in Peel Street, in SOHO, near the Mid-levels Escalator.

I am quite well known as an art critic and art & cultural commentator and, over the last 10 years, have been very vocal about government's poor record in the art and culture area.

My interest in the urban development of Hong Kong is, however, recent.

My reason for being vocal about what I see as the "the destruction of Central Hong Kong" is very simple; motivated simply by what I see when I walk the streets or look out my window: the recent increase of extremely dangerous air pollution levels; traffic congestion; the unnecessary reclamation of Victoria Harbour and grotesque levels of high-rise overbuilding. Each is directly attributable to government policy and if we (as individuals) do not say something/do something then we have only ourselves to blame.

My opposition to Tamar is similar to my opposition to other disasterous urban policy decisions being made at the moment. I think I am similar to many other people who have realised slowly that government policy on the environment and the urban landscape is seriously flawed, due:

1. To an executive-led style of governance that is undemocratic and unrepresentative – policy debate generally excludes the public and resources to enable true debate is generally in the hands of established institutions.
2. The Administration maintains a policy whereby urban development is tied into its own revenue-raising needs.
3. 'Sustainable development' is a catch-phrase rather than a reality mapped into any proposed development.

Consequently, the 'System' has pushed people like me to sit in front of people like you – a simple attempt to use legal means to make our Government listen.

The government's Tamar plans very much reflect the entrenched approach that the government pursues for Hong Kong's development – even in the face of

logic, gentle persuasion, rational argument and, then as this approach falls on the government's deaf ears, mass protests and legal challenges are mounted – however, the government continues to bulldoze its own destructive (and let's be frank, piecemeal) vision of Hong Kong.

The fact is that Central has reached a development saturation point – there is really no more room to build, build, build.

The Central reclamation is purely about the government 'creating' land to boost revenue. The major argument for the Central reclamation is to relieve traffic congestion in Central – but by building more roads it actually reinforces/increases traffic congestion. Besides, why not build an underground road bypass? But, it is the buildings on this reclamation that are important for the government's revenue needs.

The Tamar site is presently vacant; but adjacent is an even bigger site – occupied by the PLA. If the government was really committed to giving us a new civic centre as it proclaims then surely we tackle the whole area. Why not also absorb the PLA site; even if this will entail negotiations with the PLA and Central PRC government? A more holistic, measured approach is plainly logical.

Deciding what is to be built on the Tamar site is really incontestable if we use other cities for guidance. Situated on one of the world's great harbours, the only facility that could be built is a public facility – a place that the public can easily visit to enjoy the open views over Victoria Harbour. Thus a park, museum, even a library complex could be built as a (lowrise) landmark building. The government's suggestion to house its own bureaucrats on the Tamar strikes me as decision-makers deciding what is good for them. Again, the public is short-changed and offered a poor piecemeal vision of our urban landscape.

Height for Tamar site? It must be low – the government's revised height restriction of 130 metres is still too high.

Legislative Council members urgently need office space near the present LegCo building. But this office space could be located anywhere within a radius of 300 metres of LegCo. The present government offices in Icehouse Street (where many LegCo members' offices are presently located) could be developed and used entirely to house the LegCo secretariat and members' offices. The Tamar site is not the only site available.

Yours sincerely

- John Batten.