

INSIGHT

Urban challenge

Kitty Parkes says Hong Kong planners have to create a liveable city that attracts talent and investment

This week, we've read about the proposed removal of a quintessentially Hong Kong symbol: the tram. Affordable, iconic and ambling in a city that could do with more amble. Thousands of locals and tourists alike opt for this zero-carbon mode of transport each day.

The proposal put to the Hong Kong Planning Board to close the Central to Admiralty service, which will more than likely be rejected, is a red herring. What it does do, however, is offer an opportunity for debate about the real challenges facing Hong Kong's urban landscape.

Hong Kong is unique. When it comes to dense urban development, we wrote the book. The challenge for the planners is to make the city liveable. We need to do this to continue to attract and retain talent, tourism and investment.

The solution is not found in the scrapping of the tram service, but by reappraising how we use our overcrowded streets, greening the environment and breathing new life into the heart of the city by creating vibrant pedestrian areas.

There's a compelling case for rethinking the planning approach: it's not just about getting traffic moving, but also creating better spaces in which people can live,

which has a direct impact on the economy. We need a hierarchy that doesn't always put private vehicles on top.

Treating the street as another public space and not just a movement corridor is vital, but it's nothing new. Major cities around the world – some with similar density and space constraints, have redesigned their city centres for the benefit of pedestrians. Look at Broadway in New York and Orchard Turn in Singapore. An example on our own doorstep is the more pedestrian-friendly Canton Road in Kowloon.

The Central-Wan Chai Bypass and Island Eastern Corridor Link offer a solution to alleviate traffic and allow fast east-west movement.

It also presents an opportunity to create more public footpaths elsewhere and revisit schemes such as the Des Voeux Road "Oasis" proposal, by the Hong Kong Institute of Planners, MVA Hong Kong, City University and Civic Exchange, to create a tram-pedestrian precinct in Central.

If we really care about pollution and air quality – and want to protect green space – concentrating development around excellent public transport is by far the best choice. For a city that is so compact, and whose density requires

public transport to be more efficient, we should be bolder at providing greener alternatives and removing cars where possible.

Cycling is one good example. Increasingly popular in Hong Kong, the global industry is expected to be worth US\$65 billion by 2019. The major driver of the industry is the emergence of cycling as a recreational and fitness activity. We need to create the capacity for cyclists to meet latent demand and not fall back on density and climate as arguments for maintaining hostile conditions for a growing number of road users.

One approach is "multi-level" use for the same traffic corridors. Think High Line in New York, which reclaimed abandoned elevated train lines to create a linear park through the city, or Norman Foster's proposed London Sky-Cycle, with 220km of safe cycling routes.

As appealing as these solutions are, part of the challenge facing city planners is exploring solutions that challenge familiar frameworks. For instance, restrictive building regulations for solar shading, which help reduce heat gain in buildings and shelter pedestrians on the ground, derive from such frameworks.

Similarly, air conditioning remains a constant across the city,

overlooking alternatives to balance fresh air, when the climate allows, with mechanically cooled air.

On a macro level, city planners need to look at facilitating the development of successful mixed-use centres, such as Taikoo on Hong Kong Island, that offer commercial and residential alternatives to Central and Kowloon. They could also balance the need for

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new office and residential space with green public parks, both fully integrated into the fabric of the city.

In 2010, the government implemented a set of revitalisation measures to facilitate the redevelopment and wholesale conversion of older industrial buildings. The aim was to provide more floor space for suitable uses.

These uses could be broadened to include the full mixed-use spectrum of offices, residential and

retail. All encourage new green spaces by using existing terraces and rooftops. An example of revitalising former manufacturing areas is Lead 8's master plan of Longhua sub-district in north Shenzhen, which will create a new central business district, civic centre and transportation hub.

Think of the great civic parks of the world and how they are embedded into the heart of their cities. We need to bridge that gap. The waterfront development is a noticeable improvement, providing public recreational space that is accessible to everyone. Perhaps more could be learnt from multi-use world-class waterfront schemes such as Circular Quay in Sydney.

Continuing to think creatively about greening the city is vital. Hong Kong is remarkably good at making the best use of small spaces. Pocket parks, for example, fill the gaps between developments and, sometimes, the vertiginous terrain.

Above all, it's crucial that city planners, developers and the design industry build with both people and profit in mind. There is no way we can have a healthy and sustainable community without a robust economy. We need to look after both – and keep the trams.

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Polarised HK is unable to move ahead

Andrew Sheng says the city's laissez-faire policy needs to be seen in the context of local politics, which is grinding us down while our regional competitors up their game

Hong Kong has prided itself on being the freest economy in the world, but last week Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying said the "positive non-intervention" policy is outdated. Is this the end of the laissez-faire philosophy that has served Hong Kong successfully for the past half a century?

The phrase "positive non-intervention" is attributed to John Cowperthwaite, financial secretary from 1961-71, a Scotsman who inherited the moral philosophy of his countryman Adam Smith. His first speech as financial secretary marked his approach to markets: "In the long run, the aggregate of decisions of individual businessmen, exercising individual judgment in a free economy, even if often mistaken, is less likely to do harm than the centralised decisions of a government, and certainly the harm is likely to be counteracted faster."

History has shown Cowperthwaite more right than wrong. He did not say that investors might not panic (as in recent share crashes) or that government does not have a role in markets. He was simply saying that decision-making in a world of uncertainty is better made by markets. That philosophy is also built into the third plenum, where Chinese planners recognise that markets are better at innovation, job creation and resource allocation than the state.

In the debate between state and market, there has been too much of a tendency to see the issue as black and white, whereas Cowperthwaite's dictum of positive non-interventionism fitted the Chinese dialectic philosophy of *you wei, wu wei* (intervention versus self-order). There is always room for intervention, even if the natural order of markets follows the Tao.

What has changed in Hong Kong is the politics since 1997. The polarisation of political views has meant the government has become paralysed in exactly its areas of previous strength: education, innovation (technological catch-up) and infrastructure (still good, but creaking). The civil service is now caught between the politics, social media and genuine social needs. When top civil servants have to spend more time answering

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questions in Legco and the media, rather than getting on with the job, are we surprised that the mentality is switching from one of "can-do" to one of "no do, no mistakes, wait for retirement"?

Positive non-interventionism is not wrong, but the context has changed. With strong reserves, openness to global talent but high costs, the business community is asking whether they can concentrate their resources on business or should they be worried about more state intervention? If the latter, can the Hong Kong government deliver more business-friendly incentives than governments elsewhere?

The long game for Hong Kong is structural: how can Hong Kong build up its talent to benefit from the internet age, rather than protesting against anything that moves? While citizens are still debating who is right or wrong, competitors are already upping their game. The centre of gravity is shifting away – Shenzhen, Singapore, Shanghai, Seoul and Sydney are becoming alternative centres of culture, innovation and creativity.

Thus, the issue is still about local politics, not about business. To blame the civil service for not being in sync with the leadership is the wrong game. Even if the bureaucracy is willing to follow the new change in philosophy, it can't get past the current meat-grinder political process.

Hong Kong politics is in a quagmire because both sides see issues in black and white. One thinks that democracy is all about one person, one vote, and the other thinks it's possible to do business as usual.

Cowperthwaite was the right man at the right time; he melded Scottish moral philosophy with Chinese dialectic pragmatism. To get anything done, the Chinese philosophy has always been about three things: timing, geography and social unity. With Hong Kong still in the fastest-growing region in the world, the only thing lacking to move forward is social unity.

And how to get social unity is clearly the responsibility of Hong Kong's leadership, at all levels.

Andrew Sheng writes on Asian issues



The bureaucracy can't get past the current meat-grinder political process. Photo: EPA



Today's students haven't earned their political rights

Raymond Tang says if young people want to be treated as adults, they should act responsibly and be prepared to face the legal consequences when breaking the law, even for a social cause

Following the deferment, again, of the appointment of the University of Hong Kong's pro-vice-chancellor, and the storming of the HKU council's meeting by dissatisfied members of the student union, creating chaos, the city is abuzz with divided opinions.

It has become fairly obvious that the students don't just want a new pro-vice-chancellor to be appointed as soon as possible – they want their favoured candidate, Johannes Chan Man-mun, to get the job without further ado. Leaving aside the question of whether Professor Chan is best suited for the job (and here, too, it seems that opinions are very much divided), what is of interest is the level of political rights demanded by students in this time and age.

Back when I was young – and speaking as someone whose school days were in the 1950s – 18 was more than a coming of age. Most people had to start working at an early age to help sustain their family's finances, and tertiary education was an exclusive privilege for a fortunate few.

So, by the age of 18 – or even earlier – most of us were already making a fair contribution to society, and helping to shape it. Through toil and labour, young

adults earned the right to political participation. There was a socio-political case for granting political rights to people as young as 18 back then, so to speak.

Fast forward to today. The palpable increase in equality and affluence means more young adults get the opportunity to pursue tertiary education in Hong Kong at one of the city's eight universities, and many young people remain financially dependent on their parents longer into adulthood.

For those who do not find a place at one of the universities, there are other educational opportunities available, funded by the public purse.

In other words, 18 years of age no longer represents the threshold for the transformation of a young adult from being looked after to looking after himself or herself (and the family, too), as most young adults don't start working before the age of 22 or 23 these days. My humble question, therefore, is: What is the basis to justify the vesting of political rights in today's young adults?

It seems these political rights manifest themselves in many ways. Students at some universities even get to evaluate or rate their professors, and, presumably, these ratings could

directly affect the professors' own performance review. Rhetorically, if a "student" is able or good enough to decide who his teacher should be and how he should be taught, is he really a "student"? Who is teaching whom anyway?

It is worth noting society's confusion with students' political rights today. Some believe these people, as adults, deserve political rights. Yet, we also seek to spare them the legal consequences when they breach the law while taking part in a social movement, for instance, because in the eyes of the public, these students aren't considered to be adults yet; their working life has yet to begin. That stance defies logic, at least to my mind.

Political rights are what you earn by fulfilling your political responsibilities; they are not given for free, as with pretty much everything else in life. If you claim to be an adult who deserves your share of political rights, then your scope of political responsibility should be the same as everyone else's.

Age or youthful exuberance, even for a social cause, does not justify a claim to rights without corresponding responsibilities.

Whether our university students wish to be treated as legal adults with political rights, or as non-legal adults whose breach of the law can be condoned, one thing we must never forget is that, with rights come responsibilities.

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The snowball effect

G. Bin Zhao says the 2022 Olympics could give China's economy a big shot in the arm, if Beijing can spark greater public interest in winter sports

While the clouds of turmoil from the stock market have yet to clear, and China's economy faces the challenge of maintaining its target of 7 per cent growth in the second half of the year, the news that Beijing has landed the 24th Winter Olympics in 2022 is timely.

Although the Winter Olympics aren't as big as the summer Games, the effect on domestic economic and social development is certain to be positive, especially as it will promote winter sports in the country. That, in turn, will boost the growth of sporting events and tourism, enhancing national consumption rates.

So, what influence will the Games have on the economy? Russia's spending of some US\$51 billion on the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics is obviously not a typical case, but Vancouver 2010, with overall operating costs of US\$1.45 billion, according to a PricewaterhouseCoopers audit, offers viable comparisons. PwC's assessment showed the Vancouver Winter Olympics created 45,000 local jobs, contributed US\$1.75 billion to Canada's GDP and brought in US\$351 million in tourism.

Beijing's official data shows total investment in the 2022 Games will be about US\$3 billion, with an operating budget of US\$1.56 billion. Government subsidies will account for 6 per cent, the International Olympic Committee will give US\$338 million as funding, and other expenses will be covered by

money from sponsors, ticket sales, and brand authorisations.

Some estimates say the Winter Games may create up to US\$46 billion in revenue, but that figure is hard to verify. Yet, clearly, if the Games really can encourage 300 million Chinese people to participate in winter sports – one of Beijing's goals – then its contribution to the overall economy in the future will be far more than that.

For ordinary Chinese, many Winter Olympic events are relatively new, mainly because there is little opportunity to participate in such events. So, this may be more of an opportunity for middle- and high-income groups to get more interested in winter sports. If participation in these sports proves as popular as in advanced economies, their influence will be considerable. Zhangjiakou (张家口), in Hebei (河北) province, and Yanqing (延庆) county in northwest Beijing municipality – sites of some of the events – will see huge development prospects, with a major benefit for leisure tourism.

As China's economy develops, it can host other world-class sporting events. Shanghai, with other Yangtze River Delta cities, as well as Hong Kong and Pearl River Delta cities, could jointly apply to host the soccer World Cup or future Olympics, for example.

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