

Sustainability Conference -  
Strategic Role and Development of Future Infrastructures  
7 June 2014

Jointly organized by the Hong Kong Institution of Engineers,  
Engineering Forum, Hong Kong Institute of Planners  
and Supported by the Hong Kong Institute of Architects

*Change in Social Perception of Development and  
the Challenges it Presents*

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Good morning, ladies and gentlemen, it is my pleasure to be here to meet with members of the three disciplines whom I have worked a lot with when I was in the former Planning and Lands Bureau and the Lands Department.

Honestly, I am not quite sure how I could contribute to the discussions this morning on the strategic role and development of future infrastructures in the context of sustainable development.

Not being a qualified professional in your disciplines, I am in no position to offer you technical advice on how sustainability can be incorporated into MLPs, architectural designs and engineering works. And you certainly don't need me to remind you how your professions have contributed to a well developed infrastructure that has built up Hong Kong's economic competitiveness in this region and indeed in the world.

More importantly, it is obvious to all of us in this room that further development of our infrastructures is critical to maintaining Hong Kong's lead in the years to come. Otherwise none of us would be here for this conference. The challenge to us all is perhaps convincing certain quarters of the population to accept this position.

What I would therefore like to talk about is the change in our society's perception of development and the non-technical challenges encountered today by professionals involved in

development of infrastructures, particularly those of you who are younger and have an important role to play in developing infrastructures for the future of Hong Kong. I'm often told by engineers that technically nothing is infeasible to build. Let's see if the non-technical problems of developing major infrastructures Hong Kong faces today can be overcome.

To begin with, let's go back in time to the past four decades or so - from the sixties to the early nineties of the last century - when development was looked upon positively by society and indeed thought to be essential. People then believed that development could improve their well being - economically and socially. All forms of construction, be they public rental housing estates, entire new towns, highways, mass transit railway, cross harbor tunnels etc stood for progress.

If these major development projects affected some people's livelihood or uprooted people's homes, they might complain, they might protest, they might demand relocation or compensation for business loss etc. In extreme cases, the aggrieved people would confront the police and land officials who carried out land resumption and clearance. For example, in the case of construction of the MTR, Lands D spent a lot of time dealing with angry shop operators affected by the cut-and-cover works along Nathan Road, and angry locals affected by the land clearance required to build the depot and station at Sai Lau Kok in Tsuen Wan.

Those were the days when the media was largely confined to the written press, and the radio and TV stations had limited news coverage compared with live coverage round the clock today. Digital social media and phone-in programs were not yet born at that time. Those were the days when public officials carried a lot of authority, and there were no politicians to "champion" the cause of the parties affected by development projects. Legislative Council approval of funding for major Capital Works Projects was almost always assured. Judicial reviews were practically unheard of.

In the past there were already a small number of active Green Groups such as Conservancy Association, World Wildlife Fund and Friends of the Earth. They were more concerned with protecting the natural environment than human beings, and the demand for “sustainable development” was not a big issue. These Green Groups did not receive wide support and had few political allies in the Legislative Council which controlled the funding of Government capital works.

Frankly, in retrospect, the concerns of Green Groups were not entirely always unjustified, and I have a great deal of respect for them, but because it was generally believed that development would bring benefits to Hong Kong as a whole, public opinion was more inclined towards accepting that human needs and well-being should take precedence over those of Mother Nature.

Such was the generally positive perception of development in post-war Hong Kong. Indeed, this perception was proven correct. Were it not for the construction of the mass transit railway, the extensive sea reclamation along the coastline of Hong Kong, the development of new towns, the Port and Airport Development Strategy projects including the HK International Airport at Chek Lap Kok etc in the late Eighties, it is unthinkable how today the 7 million of us (plus the 4 million Mainland tourists who came last year) could have a roof over our heads to live and work, and move around speedily. It is also inconceivable how overseas businessmen could come and go with such convenience and efficiency, making Hong Kong one of the world’s great business centres and aviation hubs.

In the case of the Hong Kong International Airport, not only have the needs of HK in the beginning of this century as anticipated back in the eighties of the last century been successfully met, in fact we now have a pressing need to expand the airport and build an additional runway, only this time we have to take care of some more complex issues in the planning and implementation of the proposal, including nature conservation, the sustainability test and

last but not least, politics.

Let's deal with sustainable development first. I guess the movement that started in 1996 to prevent further reclamation in Victoria Harbour and the subsequent passing of the relevant legislation in 1997 probably marked the watershed in our society's perception of development and the emergence of sustainable development. This was followed shortly by the introduction of the statutory requirement for environmental impact assessment on so-called "designated projects" in 1998. The Government went further and in the 1999 Chief Executive's Policy Address the principle of Sustainable Development was formally adopted by the Government as the cornerstone of all policy formulation. The Government even devised a new Sustainable Assessment system in 2001 which all bureaux and departments were required to carry out on "new strategic initiatives or major programs which may bring about noticeable or persistent implications on the economic, environmental and social conditions of Hong Kong". The Council for Sustainable Development was set up in 2003, but only almost 4 years after the Chief Executive announced this in his 1999 Policy Address.

Today, nothing in Hong Kong can be taken for granted by policy makers, planners, engineers and architects involved in development.

Remember the reference to "meeting our own needs without doing damage to the prospects of future generations" in the Chief Executive's definition of Sustainable Development in his Policy Address 15 years ago? Today, the need for proposed infrastructure projects has become the starting point of our society's debate on these projects. In the past, when the Government decided to launch a major infrastructure to address a pressing problem or future need, limited or even no public consultation was carried out, but such decisions were usually accepted without much questioning by the public. Today, public consultation or public engagement as it is now called typically proceeds in 2 or 3 stages that can last up to two years!

However, the need for major infrastructural projects, and the benefits that they will bring to Hong Kong, are not readily accepted as they used to be. We have seen this happening in the case of the HK Section of the Guangzhou/Shenzhen/Hong Kong High Speed Railway, the HK/Zhuhai/Macau Bridge and the proposed three-runway-system of the HK International Airport.

Planners, architects and engineers of Hong Kong today face more challenges than ever before as the public demands more from the projects such as better conservation of the natural environment and historical buildings and the social network of a local community or village. It seems ironical that the older generation is planning for development projects that would benefit future generations but the younger generation is keen to preserve the present if not the past. The movements largely staged by young people to preserve the Queen's Pier in Central, the wetlands of Long Yuen in recent years, and the protest last night outside the LegCo building against the proposed development of North East New Territories all required planners, engineers and architects to come up with new thinking and new plans. The concern of environmental groups for reclamation works using conventional technology that severely disturbs marine ecology has triggered the introduction of new technology that will minimize such negative impact.

In this regard, I read with interest a report in the New York Times last Friday that sturgeons in New York's Hudson River are being fitted with sonic transmitters to see if pile driving and construction on a new bridge is harming the endangered Atlantic shortnose sturgeon. I wonder if our own Chinese white dolphins are also fitted with sonic transmitters to see if they are affected by the ongoing construction and proposed reclamation works around Chek Lap Kok.

In the past, development stood for progress and benefit. Today, development would be seen as irresponsible and immoral if it does not carry with it the badge of "sustainability" like the Q mark for a consumer product or an ISO certification for a process.

Professionals working on infrastructure projects today need to be highly sensitive to the social and human factor in project design and implementation. By this I mean society's changing values and perception of development -- a subject perhaps not taught in your university curriculum.

Interestingly, one serving member and one former member of the Executive Council both touched on this subject in their recent newspaper op-ed articles, and I would like to share some extracts with you. In his article titled 《發展始终是硬道理》 "Development is the sure way" in Ming Pao of 27 May, the Honourable Cheung Chi-kong commented on Hong Kong's losing out to Singapore in the global competitiveness ranking released recently by Switzerland's Lausanne Institute of Management. He attributed this to Hong Kong's resistance to importing foreign labour and further reclamation. He said that in his student days, leveling hills to reclaim seas was an achievement worthy of praise but today any mention of reclamation outside Victoria Harbour is made in a sneaky way as if one is stealing a chicken or touching a dog “現時一提到在維港以外填海，就有如偷雞摸狗般閃縮”。

More importantly, Mr Cheung made the point that Hong Kong lost out to Singapore more because of the changing social attitude towards development. His article ended with these words “without development, the older generation has less opportunity for making money but they can still live in comfort ....., but the younger generation simply can't get on the train, or can only get on a diesel train (moving up the social ladder). So for the younger generation development must surely be the way” (“不發展，上層少發財機會，但還可以持盈保泰..... 但年輕的一代，沒有發展，根本就擠不上車，又或者搭上柴油火車。所以發展對於年輕一代，一定是硬道理。”)

It seems to me that Mr. Cheung has turned the concept of Sustainable Development on its head. Whereas the definition of SD calls for the meeting of present needs without harming the prospects of future generations, Mr. Cheung is saying that development is not so much to satisfy the present (elderly) generation but to enable the younger generation to become

upwardly mobile, and they should embrace development instead of opposing it. If you agree with Mr. Cheung, younger people are irrationally jeopardizing their own prospects as well as society's present needs! To a large extent, I agree with Mr. Cheung, but he can't expect to bring the younger generation around by suggesting he knows their needs better than they themselves, and they are thinking and acting irrationally if not ignorantly. This must be the sure way to increase the tension between the younger generation and the older generation.

Another Executive Councillor (former member to be exact), Mr. Franklin LAM 林奮強 founder of the Hong Kong Golden 50 research think-tank and a strong advocate of development with his thesis on a 5-year window of opportunity for HK to regain its vitality, also sang a tune similar to Mr. Cheung's in his article captioned 《發展很 Cool! 你怎能再沉默?》 (Development is Cool! How can you remain silent?) in AM730 a day before Mr Cheung's article was published.

Franklin wrote that Hong Kong ranks number one in Asia as the city most opposed to development but ironically also the number one city in Asia most in need of development. Regrettably, the concept of "development" in the last few years has been greatly demonized, and even though everyone understands developing more land and new towns and reclaiming the seas is the only way to go, none of the millions of Hong Kong people suffering from acute housing shortage, long queues in hospitals, crowded shopping centres and streets etc, has the guts to speak up for the need for development.

Franklin concluded by asking rhetorically why would 7 million people reticently and indifferently forsake the chance of bequeathing to future generations an international metropolis that would make Hong Kong people proud and foreign people green with envy?

I also generally agree with Franklin, although I can't see millions of the silent majority joining up to demand that development should proceed regardless of financial and non-financial costs, such as

damage to the environment and social ties and wiping out cultural heritage etc. Certainly not in the present climate when development in the NT is seen by certain groups as driving out the local residents to yield more land for developers of private luxurious residential property, or when reclamation for a third runway is going to threaten the continued existence of the Chinese white dolphin. With the MTR's controversial treatment of some historic pits discovered on the construction site of the Shatin/Central rail link, this may not be a good time to extol the virtues of development.

One final point I would like to make. Sustainable development is a lofty goal. We should aspire to it and try our best to overcome the obstacles between us and this goal. The definition of Sustainable Development in the 1999 Chief Executive's Policy Address that I mentioned in the beginning of my talk presumes or implies three outcomes. First, we can achieve an outcome where everybody is a winner; Second, an equilibrium can be established between present and future needs, and Third, the needs for economic and social development can be fully integrated with the need to conserve the environment.

Does this sound too good to be true? Apparently this is do-able. The Chairman of the Council for Sustainable Development, Mr. Bernard Chan, recently wrote in a newspaper about the latest example of an infrastructural project that is extremely environmentally sustainable. He was talking about the sludge treatment plant in Nim Wan to be opened later this year. According to Mr Chan, the plant's architecture will blend into the coastal environment, rehabilitates the adjacent wetlands, offers landscaped garden and generates its own electricity, re-uses its water, and conforms to tight emission standards. Moreover, the plant welcomes the public with a fountain, a café and indoor heated spa pools!

However, reality tells us that the sustainability equilibrium cannot be fully achieved in all cases. I do not wish to sound defeatist but can you really carry out development when you cannot level a hill, cannot cut down mature trees, cannot fill in the sea, cannot build

high, cannot demolish a façade, cannot remove a village, etc. The different parties in society must learn how to compromise and reach a consensus. To achieve this, a mediator and deal maker is required. But in today's social and political climate, who has the influence and clout to forge a consensus?

My friend Ir Dr the Hon WK Lo has a tough job in LegCo chairing the debate on the need for expanding the landfills and building an incinerator, which are vital to the healthy existence of Hong Kong. He might agree with me that pontificating to the opponents of development is likely to antagonize them further.

I would therefore like to repeat the remarks by Dr. Kenneth Pang in his welcoming speech at the beginning of this conference. Professionals individually and collectively through their professional institutes, particularly younger members with just as much claim about the prospects of the next generation as the young opponents of development should express their views on development to the media, to politicians and the public. They could also demonstrate in their work their exercise of social responsibility. Bringing Hong Kong onto the path of sustainable development is not easy, but consider this to be your profession's mission -- not just to earn your keep but also for the betterment of your fellow citizens and your children and their children.

Thank you.