



Kwun Tong Road major traffic that cuts through new and old

All images by Sunnie Lau

INNOVATIVE URBANISM – A TEST CASE OF SYNTHESIZING INNOVATIVENESS AND INCLUSIVITY FROM THE BOTTOM UP: KOWLOON EAST

By Sunnie S.Y. Lau



The new CBD skyline in making

INTRODUCTION

Through a custom-designed participatory template, the year long engagement process prompted the diversified stakeholders to sit and work together. For each other they inspire, train, elevate and create leadership and foster joint partnering, all that bringing in of knowledge and experience of socio-cultural, economics as well as technology included. In essence, the stakeholders and many city interest groups managed to identify a common goal – to enhance the liveability of underprivileged residents and their neighborhood: youth, single-parent, migrant women and the environment. Adding on, the engagement also identified the significance and contribution of emergent technologies such as IOT and spatial data/design as important tools for the upgrading of human-oriented environment, soft and hard-wares included. The governance for the intended liveability enhancement

has been structured on two keywords: innovation and inclusivity. While 'Innovation refers to something new or a change to a product, idea or field.... inclusivity or inclusiveness is the practice or policy of including people who might otherwise be excluded or marginalized and members of minority groups (Google).'¹ The engagement process indeed follows closely these two as guidelines. At the same time, reference to similar international cases for lessons to be learnt and studied helped to scrutinize and rationalize the scheme prior to any feasible implementations. There is one Kwun Tong District, but in the eyes of the project team who have indulged with the Kwun Tong District stigma; in no time they realize that every place out there is in fact another Kwun Tong District deserving care and attention in the ultimate pursuit – the making of an equitable society.



New GradeAoffice vs Old insutrial buildings

THE CONTEXT

Our story begins with the “Death and Life of Kwun Tong District”, a phase borrowed from Jane Jacobs who wrote about the American cities in the 50’s. As a local district, Kwun Tong District served much of Hong Kong’s economic development since the formative years of the 1950’s. It was the perfect location for an industrialized town in close proximity to the then newly operated international airport, the Kai Tak, at the foot of nearby Lion’s Rock mountain range to its northwest and the sea to its east. Kwun Tong District’s strategic location for transport and logistics was an undeniable factor for its successful development as a prosperous, expanding township for predominantly warehouses, flatted factories for light industries that had huge demand for helping hands, all geared for the fast-grown international trade Hong Kong enjoyed at the time. Economic boom lasted more than two decades until finally her neighbor giant awoke from a long silence. Deng Xiaoping’s open door economic reform

of the People’s Republic of China (1978) changed the game rule for Hong Kong industrialists, many of whom shut down their industrial operations and moved to the inner cities of the Mother Land who offered land after land for building new factories, cheap labor among many other favorable terms for investment. Factories and warehouses became obsolete and vacant in Kwun Tung, suffered from shrinkage and economic slowdown for the years to come. Soon, the closure of Kai Tak, replaced by a bigger, modern airport elsewhere left Kwun Tong with no meaningful economic purpose except a white elephant with superfluous supply of unoccupied buildings awaiting their next life. For another two decades or more that followed, nothing major transpired until finally a turnaround of mindset for the Government to re plan Kwun Tong as a commercial business district. Kwun Tong has a new life again it seemed. Yet the visionary new life bestowed upon Kwun Tong District faces many challenges one of which is the injection

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of new spirit, image, outlook and others. Inevitably, there comes an anticipated confrontation of new and old business and people embedded in the new and the existing lifestyles. It is not easy for a shrinking yet populated town to deal with such change. Luckily, statistics has shown that the town is not as deprived as it could be, there are abundance of people for one. More importantly, for those who have resided there for a generation or two, there is a sense of identity and belonging which are evident from an outsider. There are familiar streets, corners, trees, every now and there is the faded glory of the place for instance, an old cafe or a daily supplies shop. Speaking of the populace, there are a host of established residential enclaves – the famed Yue Man Fong (Square) for example is one of the agglomerations of old settlers of Kwun Tong. Besides the older generation who have populated, the “fong” is neighbor to a great number of public housing built as late as the 90s.

THE RESEARCH

So what is the prime objective of the

research? As it has been reviewed in the foregoing discussion, the crux of the exercise deals with the contemporary understanding of social capital. In simple terms, ‘social relationships are resources that can lead to the development and accumulation of human capital... (Google).’ At the working level, ‘Social Capital is the effective functioning of social groups through interpersonal relationships, a shared sense of identity, a shared understanding, shared norms, shared values, trust, cooperation, and reciprocity (Wikipedia).’ The case of Kwun Tong presents a research challenge for everyone involved – the project team functioning as researcher and facilitator, interacting with the stakeholders. Through active engagement, the project provides and sets up a work platform for communication and collaboration among stakeholders for a common goal. It is hope that the case of Kwun Tong District leads to a human-oriented, methodological derived template that is sound, workable, and most importantly, transferrable for other districts, or cities within or beyond that of Hong Kong. 



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Ms. Sunnie S.Y. Lau, Director of Smart City Research and Industry Collaboration at the MIT HK Innovation Node of Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Also served as an Adjunct Assistant Professor, University of Hong Kong, Faculty of Architecture. Born and raised in Hong Kong, graduated with a B.A in Architecture from University of California, Berkeley; and later on obtained her M.Arch , and Certificate in Urban Design from M.I.T. Her international experiences begun with renowned architectural practices prior to postgraduate study at the M.I.T.; she worked with Morphosis Architects L.A., MVRDV Rotterdam, on international competitions, cultural projects and large scale urban developments. She also participated in the presentation drawings for the West Kowloon Cultural Competition when she was working at the Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA Asia) – Hong Kong. Recent experience covered TFP Farrell and Herzog de Meuron - in the design development of the M Plus Museum.

Her academic study focuses on Smart City, urban masterplanning, urban mobility and infrastructure, architectural typologies with an interest in creative and innovative sustainable design strategies. She believes firmly in bridging professional and academia by active teaching engagements (concurrent appointment from HKU DoA & DUPAD) such as HKU M.Arch Design Studio, M.Arch thesis, Master of Urban Design Thesis, Urban research-oriented design seminar – “Urban Mobility and Smart Infrastructure”, and the MIT B.S. Arch. Undergraduate Design Studio. More recently, she has been a regular design critic besides instructor at the architecture and urban design programs at local and Mainland Schools (HKU, CUHK, Tsinghua University, China Academy of Art, Tongji University, etc).

In 2017, She was invited to be the Co-Curator & Exhibitor of the Hong Kong Shenzhen Bi-City Biennale Of Urbanism\Architecture (Hong Kong).

Her current research-oriented practice - SOSArchitecture Urban Design Studio Ltd. covers a wide range of works; which includes but not limited to smart urban furniture (Infrastructures), urban place-making (with community engagements), masterplanning, adaptive reuse and urban regeneration projects in Hong Kong, Mainland China.



The affordable wet market that supports community