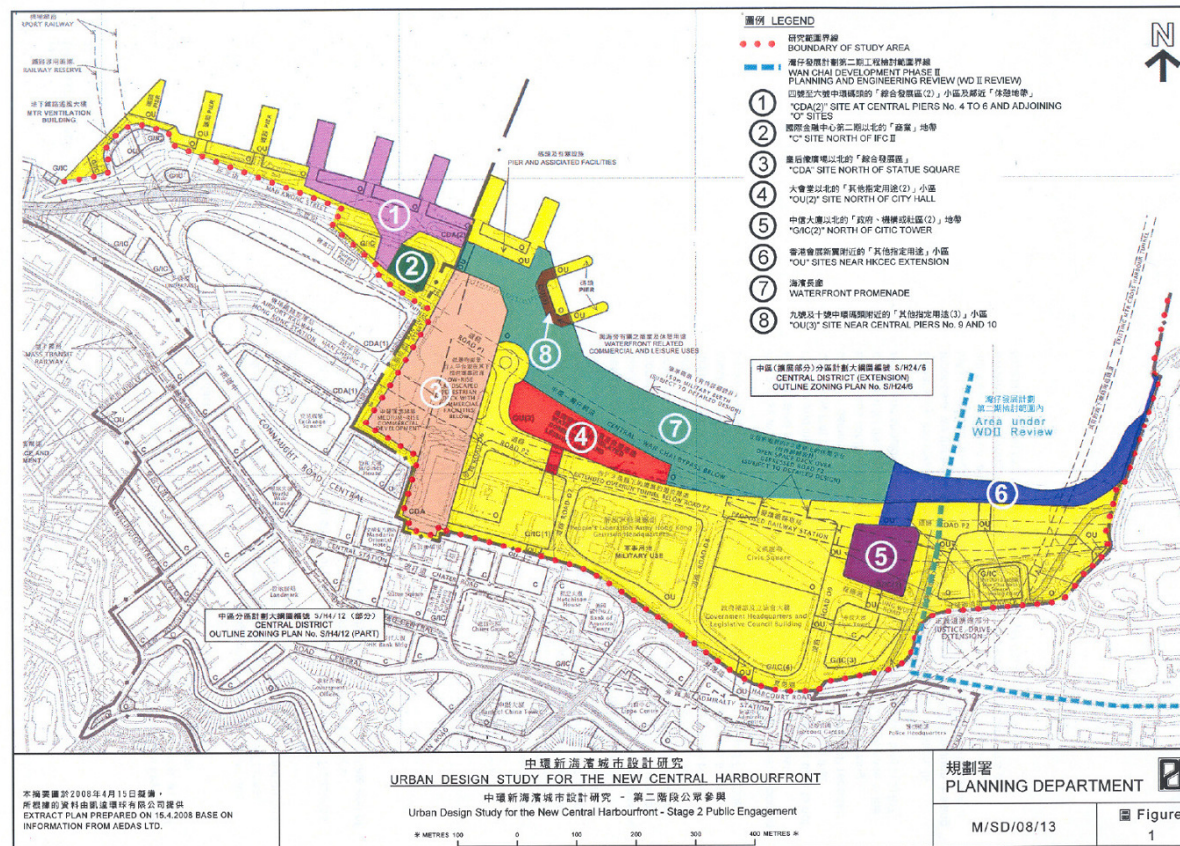


# CENTRAL WATERFRONT PLANNING – A REVIEW

By Roger Nissim, Best Practice Committee member of Harbour Business Forum, December 2008

There are a series of fundamental planning issues that need to be identified and addressed with regard to the Governments latest layout and models.



1. The Plan and layout is being presented as one plan whereas, in fact, there are two plans sitting side by side. The land for Sites 1 and 2 lie within OZP A/H4/33 and 38 that were approved in 1995 and 1996 respectively. Development parameters for Site 1 were set, initially, with a g.f.a. of 55740sq.m and a height limit of 53mPD. In 1998 plan A/H4/49 was approved setting the same g.f.a. but increasing the height to 95-150mPD envisioning a hotel/commercial development of 12-14 storeys<sup>1</sup>. It is significant to note that the g.f.a. proposed for these 2 sites has barely been reduced, 92,200sq.m compared to 92,465sq.m<sup>2</sup>, indicating an unexplained reluctance to change any of the development parameters in spite of all that has occurred in terms of public expectation of how waterfront land should be developed in the intervening 10 years.

Site 2 was planned for offices with 28 storey including a public transport interchange re-provisioned at ground level. The remaining sites on the Government layout sit on land which has been subject to various legal and planning challenges and where the OZP S/H24/6 has not yet been fully defined. Here the Government has indicated a preparedness to reduce development intensity, split the ground scraper into several blocks etc.

Site 3 is now 157,400sq.m v 190,000sq.m, Site 4 is 7500sq.m v 14,580sq.m and Site 6 is 2,900sq.m v 24,415sq.m. There is clearly an unexplained differential in the treatment in planning terms of these two areas that are in total conflict with a wide range of studies and activities that have taken place in the last 5 years.

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<sup>1</sup> LegCo Panel on Planning, Land & Works  
Sub Committee to review Planning for the Central Waterfront  
Paper CB (1) 1083/06-07 (OI) submitted for information on 8<sup>th</sup> March 2007

<sup>2</sup> Urban Design Study for the New Central Harbourfront  
Stage 2 Public Engagement: Consultation Digest Planning Department April 2008

2. 2003 Planning Departments own study on how the Waterfront should be planned and developed entitled Planning Study on the Harbour and its Waterfront Areas February 2003<sup>3</sup>.

Interestingly the purpose of this study as described in its introduction states that: 'In 1999 the Town Planning Board endorsed the "Proposed Vision and Goals for Victoria Harbour". The vision statement was "To make Victoria Harbour attractive, Vibrant, accessible and symbolic of Hong Kong – a harbour for the people and a harbour of life."

The Vision Statement proposed a number of admirable goals the most relevant being:

- To bring the people to the Harbour and the Harbour to the people
- To enhance the scenic views of the Harbour and maintain visual access to the harbour front.
- To enhance the Harbour as a unique attraction for our people and tourists.
- To create a quality harbourfront through encouraging innovative building design and a variety of tourist, retail, leisure and recreational activities, and providing an integrated networks of open space and pedestrian links.'

It was from this study that the planners derived their own Harbour Planning Principles which would lead to a Harbour Planning Framework. The second stage of the study would set urban design and landscape principles.

The report highlighted the well known problem of poor/obstructed access to the harbour, incompatible uses such as ex KCRC Freight Yard, lack of waterfront attractions.

The internal principles were very much geared to tourism e.g.

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<sup>3</sup> Planning Department's website: [www.pland.gov.hk](http://www.pland.gov.hk)  
Harbourfront Enhancement Committees website: [www.harbourfront.org.hk](http://www.harbourfront.org.hk)

- Improve pedestrian accessibility to the waterfront from public transport access points.
- Provide greater continuity of waterfront promenades to link tourism clusters.

4 broad Urban Design & Landscape Objectives were identified to guide development:

- 1) Enhance visual relief provided by the Harbour;
- 2) Protect Harbour setting;
- 3) Provide easy pedestrian access to waterfront;
- 4) Encourage variety and visual excitement

The 4 Objectives were reinforced by the following Principles intended to realize the Objectives above.

- a) Alternate activity clusters and peaceful areas;
- b) Quality design along the waterfront;
- c) Step down building height to Harbour shore;
- d) Emphasize key locations with landmark buildings/features;
- e) Integrate or connect historic buildings with waterfront;
- f) Create strong visual links to waterfront from hinterland activity centres
- g) Maximize continuity of waterfront promenade;
- h) Create focal open spaces for lively outdoor activities and as view points at intervals along waterfront;
- i) Provide direct access to waterfront from mass public transport and activity centres.

**Table of Tourist Features at Central Waterfront**

|                                 |  |
|---------------------------------|--|
| Attractions                     | Festival Market<br>Promenade<br>Public Art<br>Star Ferry Clock Tower<br>City Hall  |
| Support facilities              | Ground scraper<br>Retail Centre<br>Restaurants in Festival Market<br>Civic Place   |
| Activities                      | Civic Parades, Carnivals, Pageants<br>Outdoor entertainment/concerts/displays<br>Street Entertainment<br>Viewing Harbour Events<br>Food/Craft Demonstrations |
| Design Motifs                   | Dragon and Pearl (Promenade)<br>Maritime (Ferry Piers)   |
| Linked Attractions & facilities | Hong Kong Park<br>Museum of Tea Ware<br>Hotels in Central & Admiralty<br>Peak Tram   |

**Note:** Those proposals did not extend to Sites 1 & 2 emphasizing their separateness.

Going into the main body of this study the following table appears in the context of guiding the step down building height to Harbour Shore.

**Table 5.1 Building Height Concept**  
**(Landmark building may exceed above guidelines)**

| <b>LOCATION</b>                                       | <b>BUILDING TYPE</b>                                    | <b>MAX. BUILDING HEIGHT MPD</b> |
|---|---|---------------------------------|
| On structure over water                               | Ferry Pier  | 15m                             |
| On structure over water                               | Major terminal  | 35-70m                          |
| On Promenade  | Minor structures (e.g. Kiosks/cafes)                    | 15m                             |
| On Promenade  | Tourist attractions (e.g. festival market, museum etc.) | 25m                             |
| First row facing promenade (no road separation)       | Residential, waterfront façade                          | 45-60m                          |
| First row facing promenade (no major road separation) | Non residential waterfront façade                       | 30-40m                          |
| First row facing promenade across major road          | Residential and non residential                         | 55m                             |
| Second and other row                                  | Residential and non-residential                         | Variable depending on location  |

Compare this with the heights still being proposed for Sites 1 & 2.

Surely the same principles should apply and, by the way, where is the properly designed promenade in this location?

3. 2005-2006, Central Harbourfront and Me (CHaRM) was organized by the Harbourfront Enhancement Committee (HEC) in collaboration with Planning Department & the Bureau<sup>4</sup>. District Councillors, professionals and the community were all consulted. This was the first time the areas behind the Central Piers including Sites 1 and 2 had been subjected to any detailed consideration. The Final Report was published in March 2006 and is on the Planning Departments website. In total some 3000 people participated at various stages of the programme with 651 interviews being conducted territory wide covering a cross section of the community.

The principle findings were that the commercial function should be related to shopping and dining, priority should be given to pedestrians and the area should be designed as a gathering place, recreational area and performance views. Poor pedestrian access was highlighted as a problem to be solved.

The interviewees responded as follows regarding their preferences 81% Green Garden, 72% Harbour front promenade, 67% covered footbridge, 61% public seating, 53% viewing platforms. The prime users were clearly related to leisure functions to enable users to relax and enjoy with preferences stated as follows: 75% open air restaurants, 72% public toilet, 71% tourist information booth, 60% police post, 56% shops selling snacks and 52% suggesting traditional Hong Kong style shops.

4. April 2006, the HEC published the finally agreed version of the Harbour Planning Principles (HPP's)<sup>5</sup>. Principles 7 and 8 in fact echo quite accurately the findings of CHaRM detailed above.

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<sup>4</sup> Planning Department's website: [www.pland.gov.hk](http://www.pland.gov.hk)  
Harbourfront Enhancement Committees website: [www.harbourfront.org.hk](http://www.harbourfront.org.hk)

<sup>5</sup> Planning Department's website: [www.pland.gov.hk](http://www.pland.gov.hk)  
Harbourfront Enhancement Committees website: [www.harbourfront.org.hk](http://www.harbourfront.org.hk)

### Accessible Harbour

Principle 7: Victoria Harbour must integrate with the hinterland in a comprehensive manner including ample unrestricted visual and physical access for pedestrians, preferably at grade, to and along the Harbour as well as the Harbour front areas.

### Public Enjoyment

Principle 8: The planning and development of Victoria Harbour and its harbour front should maximize opportunities for public enjoyment. Land required for and the impact from infrastructure developments, utility installations and land uses incompatible with the harbour planning principles should be minimized.

5. Following on from the HPP's the HEC in June 2007 then set out their Harbour Planning Guidelines (HPG's) to give more detailed guidance to the future planning and development of our waterfront land. The following relevant headings and phrase are quoted for reference:-

### Land Use Planning

Diversity of Uses to promote vibrancy and to enhance public enjoyment such as open space, retail, dining, recreation, leisure, cultural and tourism related facilities.

### Recreation & Leisure Uses

Public space for recreation and leisure uses should be created wherever possible. Passive recreation and leisure activities should be facilitated where practical.



### Open Space

Opportunities should be sought to connect open space to the harbour-front so as to increase visual and physical permeability. Harbour- front open space should be planned to integrate with adjacent waterfront promenades, ferry pier/landing steps and supporting retail/dinning facilities to create a focal point and informal gathering place both for residents & tourists. A continuous promenade of adequate width should be provided along the entire harbour-front areas, as far as is practicable, to accommodate such leisure activities as strolling and jogging, pedestrian circulation, tree planting and landscaping. Cycle tracks should be encouraged where there is sufficient width.

### Urban Design

Development Density – developments fronting directly onto Victoria Harbour should adopt a lower development density to provide a human scale environment which is commensurate with the harbour-front setting.

Building Height – developments within and around the harbour-front areas should generally adopt a gradation of height profile with building height descending towards the harbour to avoid dominating the harbour and to increase permeability to the water body.

Harbour front buildings should be of small footprint and avoid using podium as far as possible to avoid creating an impermeable 'wall' along the harbour-front and so hindering air circulation and reducing visual permeability.

### Streetscape Design

Active street frontage with various activities such as shop fronts, bars, cafes are encouraged along the harbour-front to integrate with

the pedestrian promenades with a view to adding life and vitality of the Harbour.

### Landscaping

Areas along both sides of Victoria Harbour should be landscaped to optimize greening of the harbour-front areas. Hard surface paving should be reduced and vegetation maximized in order to improve microclimate and provide thermal comfort.

### Physical Linkage

A traffic free environment along the harbour-front is encouraged. The provision of a continuous pedestrian at grade access along the harbour-front is also encouraged.

The harbour-front should be within easy reach of the general public.

In order to provide user friendly and pleasant linkage, at grade crossing should be considered as far as possible.

## 6. Valuing Victoria Harbour

In 2005 the Harbour Business Forum commissioned GHK, consultants in Economic Development and Environmental Economics, to conduct a Contingent Valuation Study to try and establish what value the community placed on Victoria Harbour and at the same time soliciting the public preference for what they would prefer to see their Harbour looking like and how much would they be prepared to pay or value their preferred choice.

The contingent valuation method involved directly asking people, in a properly structured survey, how much would they be willing to

pay for specific environmental service. It is called 'contingent' valuation because people are also asked to state their willingness to pay, contingent on a specific hypothetical scenario and description, in this case of the Harbour. It has been used internationally for a variety of purposes such as cost benefit analysis, demonstration of importance, priority setting. Recent examples include the bid for the London Olympics where it helped demonstrate the communities support for the bid, Centennial Park, Sydney where it helped justify expenditure of public money on management and maintenance and Recreation and amenity use of urban green spaces in Guangzhou where it provided a cost benefit analysis justifying more resources. For Victoria Harbour 1034 people were interviewed, statistically representative of HK's population. People's preferences were very clear and consistent with other Harbour surveys and opinion polls. Considered most important were:

Water Quality (99%)

Green Areas (93%)

Promenades (85%)

Pedestrian access at ground level (79%)

More residential and commercial buildings and water activities were least important (less than 25%)

When asked about their willingness to pay the average monthly payment overall was \$222 with an average time period of 5.8 years which when grossed up to the total HK population gives a NPV of \$73billion. Such a high dollar value provides evidence to HK's decision makes that harbour planning and development is a priority and revenue – generating land uses may not be the best solution for the harbour-front. It helps to place a figure on the intangible costs and benefits that have not been valued before. These results were published in May/June 2006<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Harbour Business Forum's website:  
[www.harbourbusinessforum.com](http://www.harbourbusinessforum.com) plus  
[www.bec.org.hk/eng/hbf.aspx](http://www.bec.org.hk/eng/hbf.aspx)

## 7. Central Waterfront Design Competition

Designing Hong Kong held an International Competition in 2007 with over 80 organizations and firms participating. The purpose of this Urban Planning & Design Competition was to support the collective progress in the envisioning and planning of the Central Waterfront and to deepen our understanding of the sites development options and potential. By the end of the competition with the aid of a highly qualified and eminent independent jury 4 finalists were selected and a winner announced in November 2007<sup>7</sup>. The four projects each with a different concept and approach to creating vibrancy and dynamism along the waterfront were selected for further shaping and development. These projects all achieved the “innovative yet feasible” requirement with four driving concepts:

- Subterranean development with extensive parkland cover;
- Ground floor courtyards and building space with permeable roof top garden and public spaces;
- Fine scale and active mixed use development;
- Large gardens with mixed development incorporating community aspirations.

At the awards evening held in November 2007 Mrs. Carrie Lam the Secretary for Development made the following interesting and relevant comments on the finalists proposals. She commended their innovative designs and had identified 3 key words that has emerged as guiding principles as the Jury announced their decisions. These 3 words were ‘Vitality’, ‘Humanity’ and ‘Connectivity’ so that the harbour-front should have life, give people a place to enjoy and appreciate and for her, most significantly was ‘Connectivity’, not only physically connecting the people to the water but also historically connecting people back to the past recognizing the Harbours intrinsic heritage value. She did say that as bureaucrats they would be looking for feasible and practical ideas but recognized the need for the planners to take a bolder more coherent approach to waterfront planning.

At the end of her speech she stated that her planning department had delayed their own consultation programme on the Urban Design

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<sup>7</sup> Designing Hong Kong Group’s website: [www.designinghongkong.com](http://www.designinghongkong.com)

Guidelines for Central in order to take into consideration the outcome of this competition. It is both a scandal and a tragedy that they have, in the event, drawn so little inspiration from the outcomes and have persisted with their pre 1998 planning concepts.

#### 8. Central Harbour – “The Happening Place”

In September 2008 The Hong Kong Urban Design Alliance (HKUDA) presented this alternative proposal<sup>8</sup>. HKUDA are an independent professional group made up principally of planners from HKIP and architects from HKIA whose mission is to promote a high standard of urban design, the art of making places for people – the public realm and improving the quality of urban life.

In their presentation they start by reviewing the 1998 Draft Central Extension OZP and then go onto compare the Government’s current proposal with their own, highlighting where they differ and why. They also make reference to the 4 winning designs of Designing HK Waterfront 2007 International competition referred to earlier. The essence of their submission is that, without any loss in saleable floor area, it is possible to achieve a vibrant urban waterfront park that is consistent with the HPPs and Guidelines that has responded to public aspirations, results in development intensities consistent with the location and also respecting the natural context and existing urban fabric. They suggest 8 Place Destinations: Harbour Place, Central Ferry Piers, Station Square Esplanade, Inner Harbour, Central Waterfront Promenade, Tamar Green, Central Harbour Hotel, Commercial Complex, Eco Park, APA Arts Corner and Maritime Museum & Marine Basin. Building height’s mainly range between 1 and 4 storeys with the hotel/commercial site allowed 6-9 storeys.

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<sup>8</sup> Harbour Business Forum website  
[www.harbourbusinessforum.com](http://www.harbourbusinessforum.com)

9. Conclusion

It seems apparent that Governments Planning parameters and proposals still go back to the earlier 1990's OZP and planning criteria that were acceptable then. However in the past 10 years, as shown by all the case studies/proposals referred to in this paper, societal changes and public aspirations demand there be a completely new approach to urban planning, particularly on the waterfront. The Governments' proposals make no reference and have little or no regard for the HPPs & Guidelines which should now be the starting point. The 2007 International Competition and the more recent 2008 HKUDA presentation give a clear indication as to how the planning of this area can be achieved to meet these contemporary demands and aspirations. The Government planners need to explain why these cannot be followed particularly in the light of the results of their own 2003 Planning Study?