A historical map of Hong Kong Harbour, showing the coastline, waterways, and surrounding land. The map is titled 'HONGKONG HARBOUR' and includes a compass rose and a scale. The map is overlaid with a large blue title.

HONGKONG HARBOUR

WATERFRONTS AS HISTORY

To pursue a metaphor, though by no means an obscure one, a waterfront and its immediate hinterland are at once the present text and a palimpsest of a port – simultaneously its maritime present and its maritime past.

Looked at with an informed and thoughtful eye every particular congeries of seawall and jetty, dock and building, highway, flyover and street, boulevard, arcade and alley tells a tale. Decoded, it describes how a once anonymous shoreline, little distinguishable from whatever parts of the coast lay east, west, north and south, evolved into this port – or this long abandoned, silted up relic – with these features in the here and now.



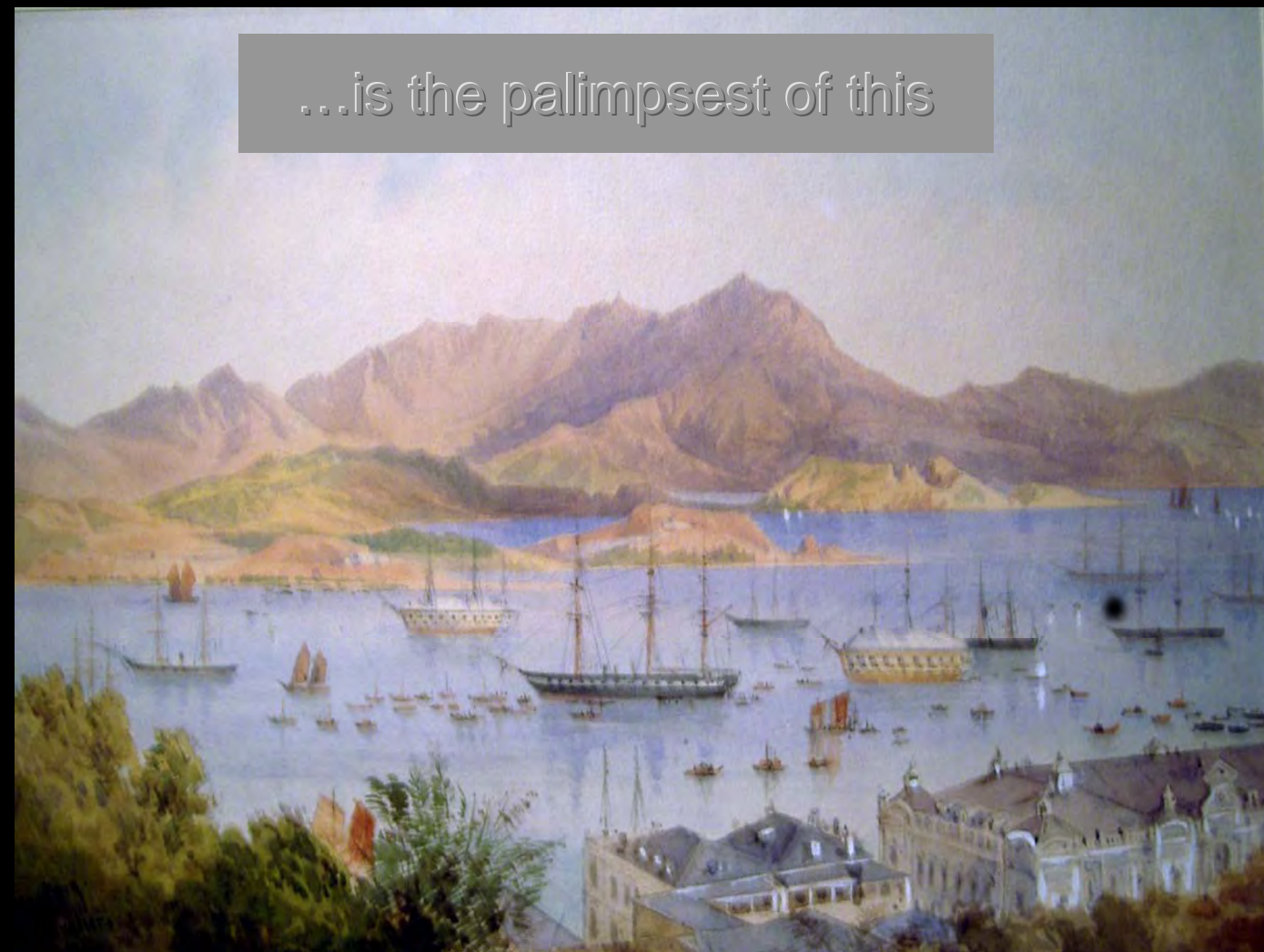
But as paleographers know, a palimpsest is readable only when the work of whoever was responsible for erasing what was first written on a parchment was not thoroughly done. Wholly erase the traces of the past with the actuality of the present and that past is not only lost to sight. It is lost beyond recovery.

A key to what I am considering here is the matter of erasure – how complete it is. And the answer is, if historical awareness is lacking, the past can disappear.

A lowly clerk in a scriptorium, anxious to get the day's work done, has no historical consciousness. All he has is a job. Scrape clean the vellum so something new can be written. If he's assiduous, not a trace of what went before is left. The past has gone. Forever.

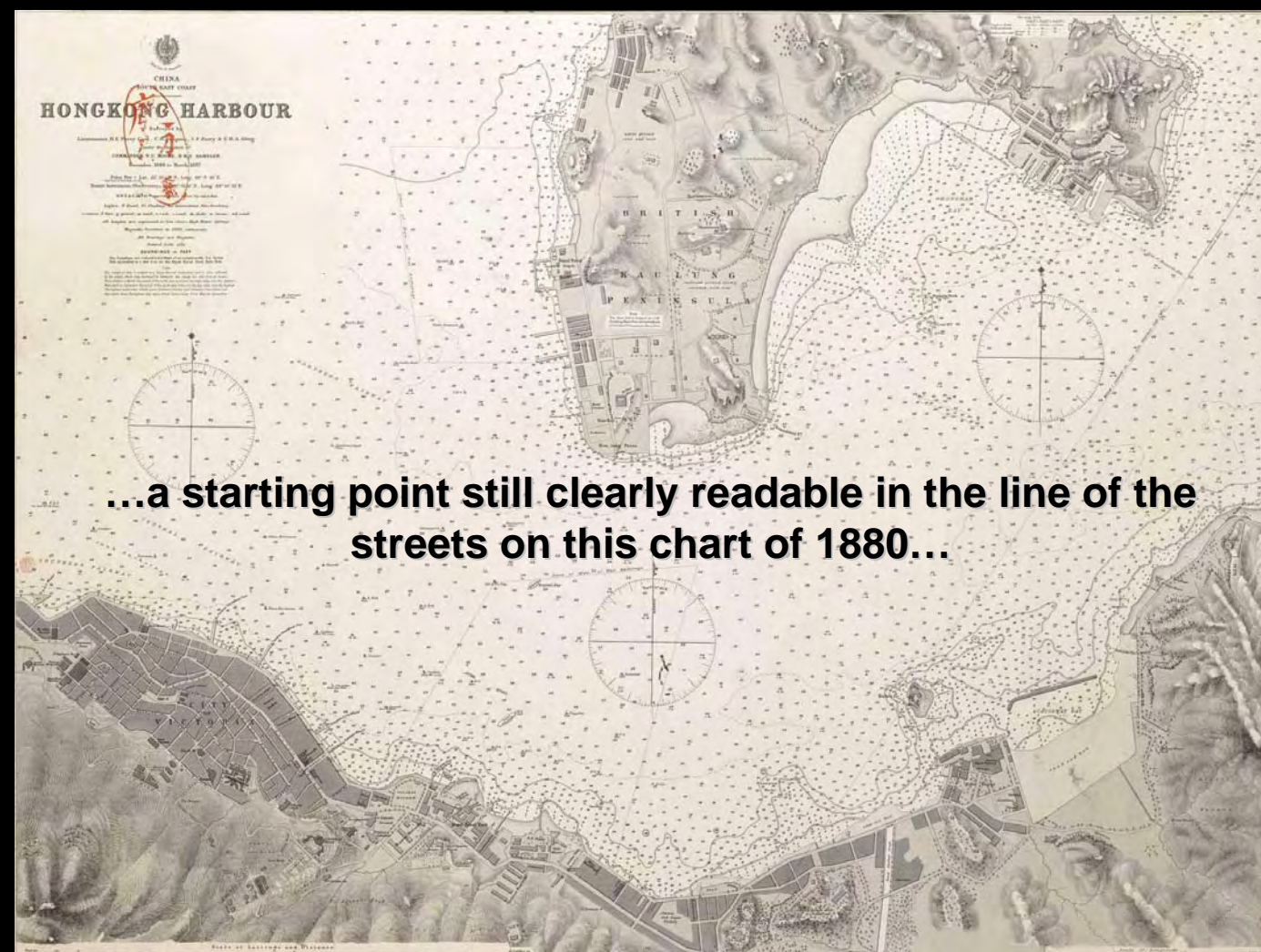
The same is true with the gross, physical manifestation of place. Landscapes may be memory, as Simon Schama reminds us, but only if we can see in the present traces of the past. A waterfront walled off, or separated by roads from its physical and human hinterland is a waterfront with its past lost from sight.

...is the palimpsest of this



Perhaps that does not matter. Perhaps, to a people indifferent to their past, it is the task of the present to erase it. Though, before nodding happily in agreement with such iconoclasm it is worth remembering George Santayana's aphorism that "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

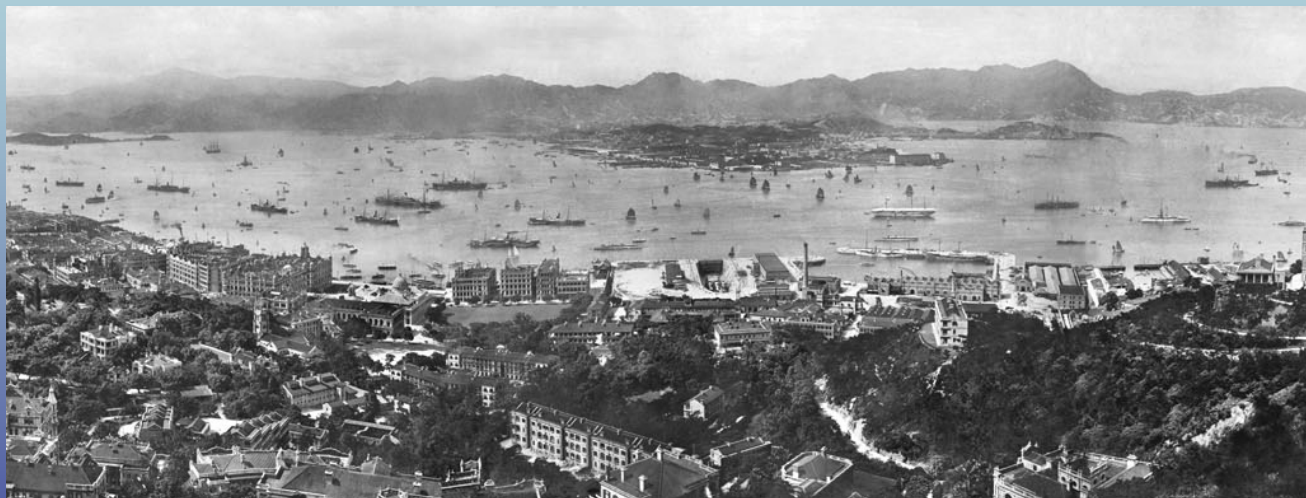
If we look at Hong Kong's harbour, an endless repetition of inhuman ugliness begotten by greed out of profound ignorance and complete indifference, we can see how, without some shift in sensibility – the development of a sense of maritime history – the past will continue to be in grave danger. And the same aesthetic and human disaster we have now will be repeated over and over again, echoing down the decades to come.



...a starting point still clearly readable in the line of the streets on this chart of 1880...

It follows that highlighting the palimpsest of our port's past is a key principle to designing a harbour for people. No harbour is a mere traffic planner's or property mogul's playground.

**The process of a more wholesale erasure
began ten years later with the great Praya &
Royal Navy dockyard reclamation of 1887-
1893...**



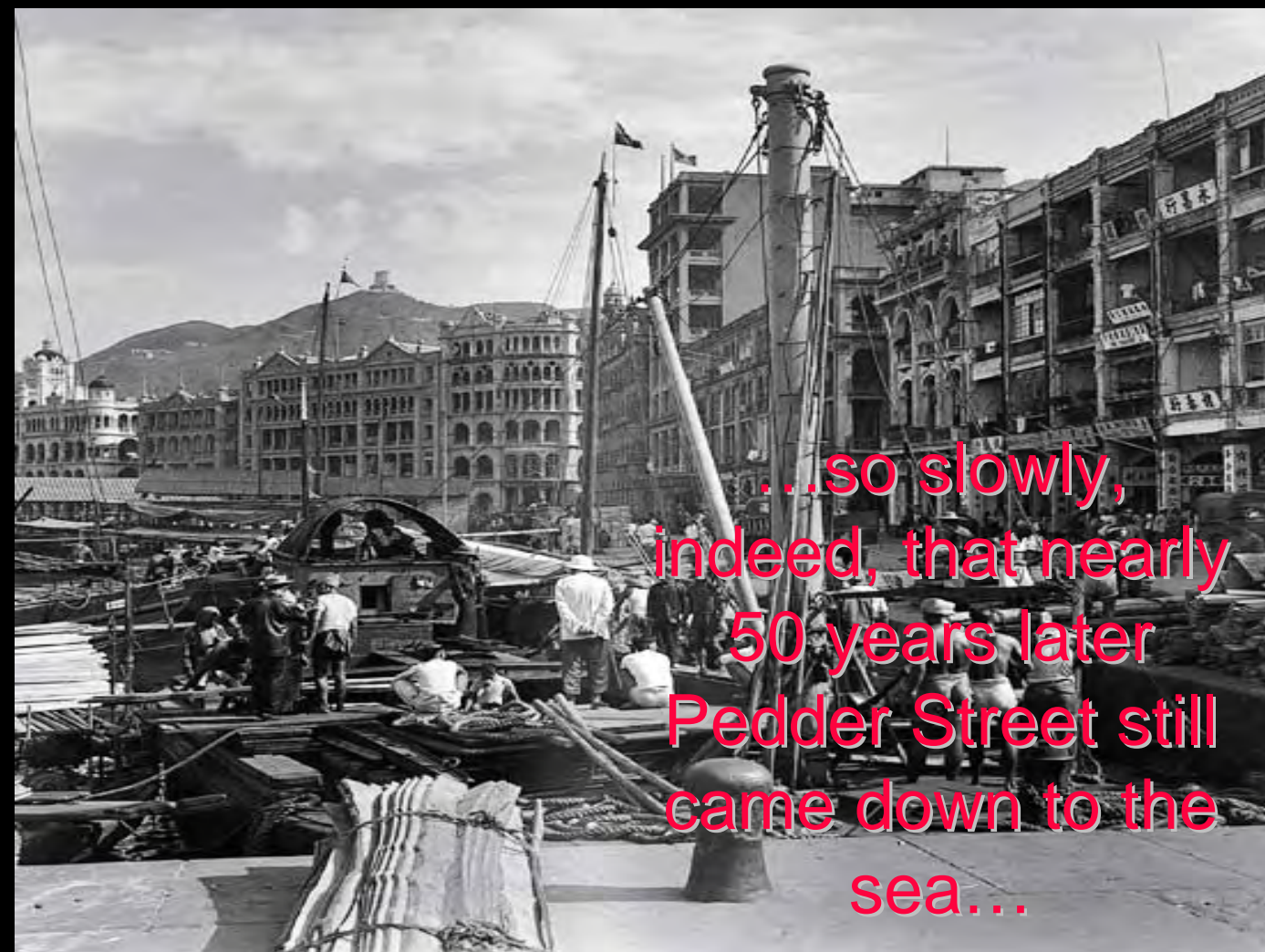
Nor is it a recreational resource the appearance and facilities of which can change, willy-nilly, as fashion dictates. It is a living, human creation with a past. Whatever is done to it should connect to what has gone before to help us make sense of what is here today.



...that was when the waterfront
really began marching
seawards...

... if slowly...

Nothing that is done to a harbour should – as it has in Hong Kong – set out to obliterate the intimate relation that has existed and still exists – if in a different way – between a port's inhabitants and the sea.



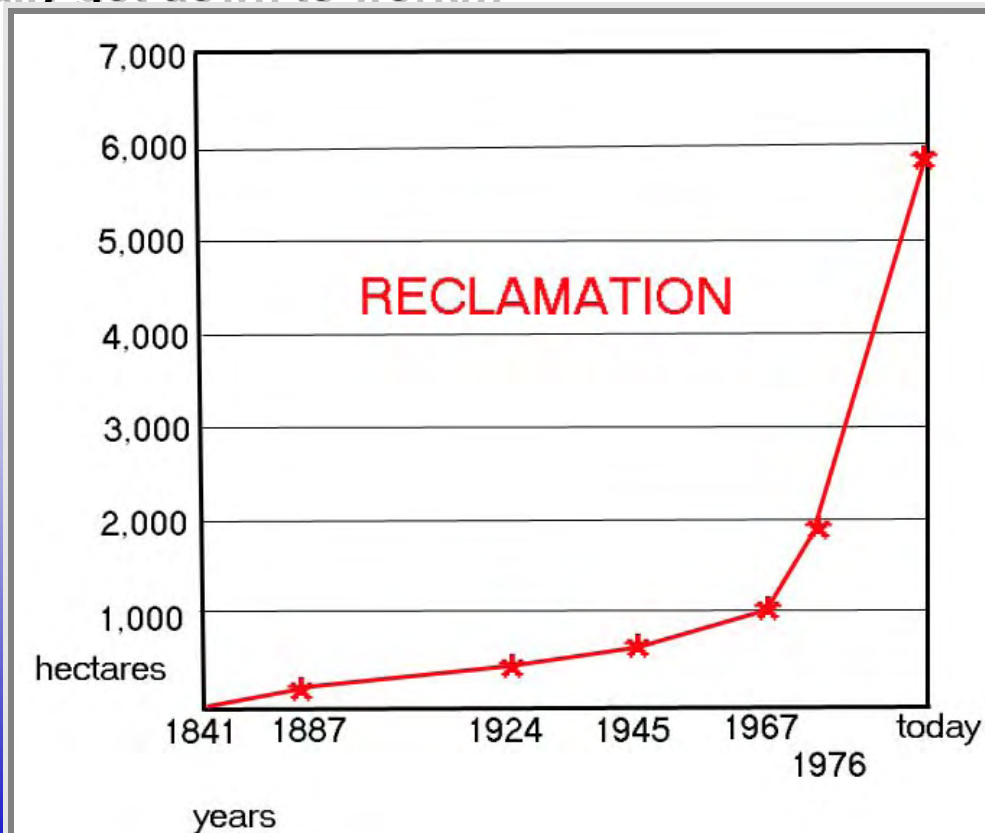
Whatever one does to a harbour by way of giving it a modern, human face and bringing people into touch with its sights, sounds and...if with caution...smells, it should not 'overwrite', leave alone erase the past and the role the sea and ships have played and still play in our lives.

**...and Hong Kong's earliest
shorelines could still be
made out...**

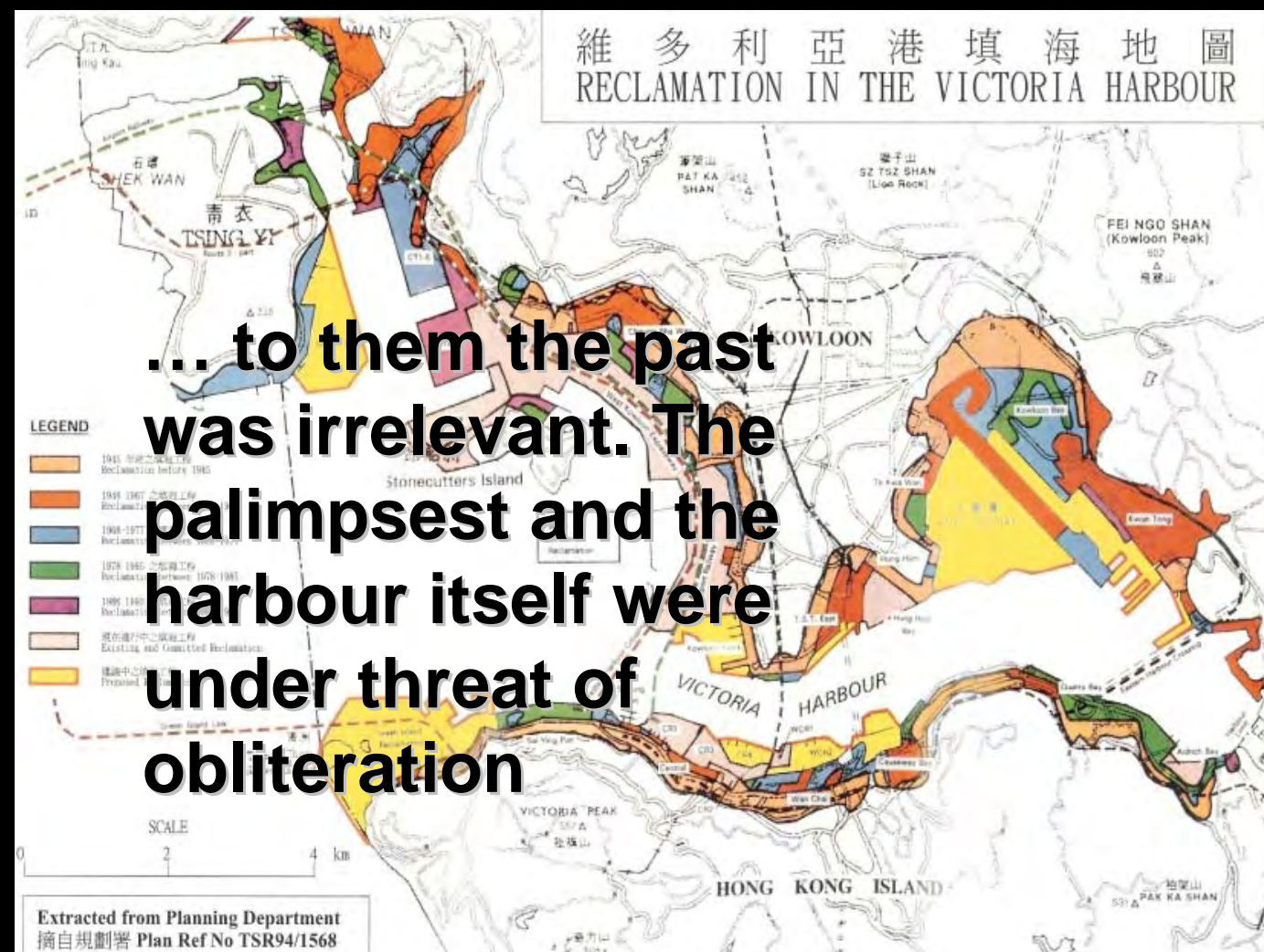


Of course if that is a valid principle for designing a harbour as a human resource for people to enjoy, Hong Kong's harbour is a monument not just to its neglect, but to the purblind implementation of its antithesis – or what you get if you marry a *Hello Kitty* aesthetic to a *1066 And All That* understanding of the past.

...that was until, in 1967, Hong Kong's road transport lobby, property developers and government planners really got down to work...



And it is so because, in the quest for public revenue and private profits from development, and in an abject surrender to the tyranny of the internal combustion engine, each wholly indifferent to a harbour as a harbour, Hong Kong's government, road transport lobby and property developers in the last 40 years have done their levelling best to destroy the kernel of Hong Kong's story.



Done their best, that is, to exclude the sea and its role in how we have become what we are. Only an eleventh hour uprising of express public distaste has imposed a stay of execution...



The design of a harbour – however that is come upon – should aim to make the palimpsest legible; to connect past with present using the latter to illuminate the former. This, as we shall see, could and should have the useful additional benefit of acting as a constraint on present and future development.

An aerial photograph of Sydney Harbour, showing the city built on the surrounding hills and the water of the harbour. The water is a deep blue, and the city is a dense grid of buildings and roads. The harbour is surrounded by green hills and some industrial areas.

**This is one of the most beautiful harbours
in the world.**

**The Sydney Harbour Foreshore
Authority ensures it stays that way.**

Imagine, if your mind can take it, what Sydney harbour would look like today had the Hong Kong Government been...and here one is lost for a word since 'responsible', 'in charge', 'having oversight' or any other word or phrase implying an active intelligence at work is laughably inappropriate.



Here's the same harbour if the Hong Kong Government had been responsible...if that's the word.

The dashed lines show the 2007-2009 harbour development plan for an east-west thruway and the new state and city government offices

And I don't think this is much of an exaggeration. When no one or nothing is actually in charge looking at the whole picture, a complete mess is the most likely result. Especially when the presiding mentalities are ones with what one might style the total townie's aesthetic. One that thinks a shopping mall the acme of beauty and a winding footpath something in need of a dose of concrete – *Hello Reinforced Kitty* again.



Rescue the Present with the Past

- **USE THE OLDER WATERFRONTS AND THE STORIES THEY CAN TELL TO ASSERT THE VALUE OF TODAY'S HARBOUR**

Using Hong Kong's harbour as our example, designing it starts where the harbour *used to be* and connects that to what we now have.

Create Heritage Shorelines

- Identify significant early shorelines with plaques every 200m



For example, along Hong Kong and Kowloon's shores old and new – from 1840, through 1850, the 1860s, 1887-94, the 1890s, 1921-24, 1946, and the 1960s-90s – any successful design must begin with one or more heritage trails. Plaques on pavements and buildings should mark the lines of successive waterfronts. At various points information panels would explain the evolution with small maps, pictures and brief texts. And in the process the trails would elucidate the names of streets now far from the sea – Possession Street, Haven Street, Ship Street, Yacht Street, etc., clarify the siting of temples, commemorate early settlement patterns and connect the harbour's past with its present.



Well, they would if there was to be a way, as there is not for 90%+ of Hong Kong's shoreline at present, to get to and walk along the waterfront.

Where once were jetties and wharves, slipways and godowns, mudflats and graving docks and the hubbub and bustle of a working waterfront a visitor should find a proud memory proclaimed.

Create Heritage Shoreline Trails

- Mark narrative points for audio- or print guides.
- Use well designed panels with brief, informative text.

No. 1 TIN HAU TEMPLE

This is one of the oldest temples in Hong Kong, dating from the 18th century.

It was built here, close to the sea, by the Hakka Tai family, members of which had found a statue of Tin Hau in the rocks on the shore nearby and who still manage the temple.

Tin Hau, the Empress of Heaven, is the patron deity of Hong Kong's boat people whose money paid for the temple to be built



- Link old shoreline through newer to today's waterfront

And on the modern waterfront the story should be continued in further panels explaining today's working harbour visible...just...through the murk. He or she should be able to lean on a rail and watch the passage of tugs, lighters and river craft, the to-ing and fro-ing of ferries and the wanderings of crew boats and police boats, customs launches and firefloats, yachts and pleasure junks, linking the bits of that long evolution of the port that still remain close to downtown. Beyond, far out in the derricks and funnels, cranes and kingposts of ships in the western anchorage, in the silhouettes of ocean going leviathans making in and out of Kwai-Tsing, and in the spidery traces of the container gantries beyond Stonecutters Island, the viewer's gaze could see the modern deep sea port, carried from its historic birthplace by visible changes in the size of ships and the manner of handling cargoes.

Happily, at grass roots level people do care...

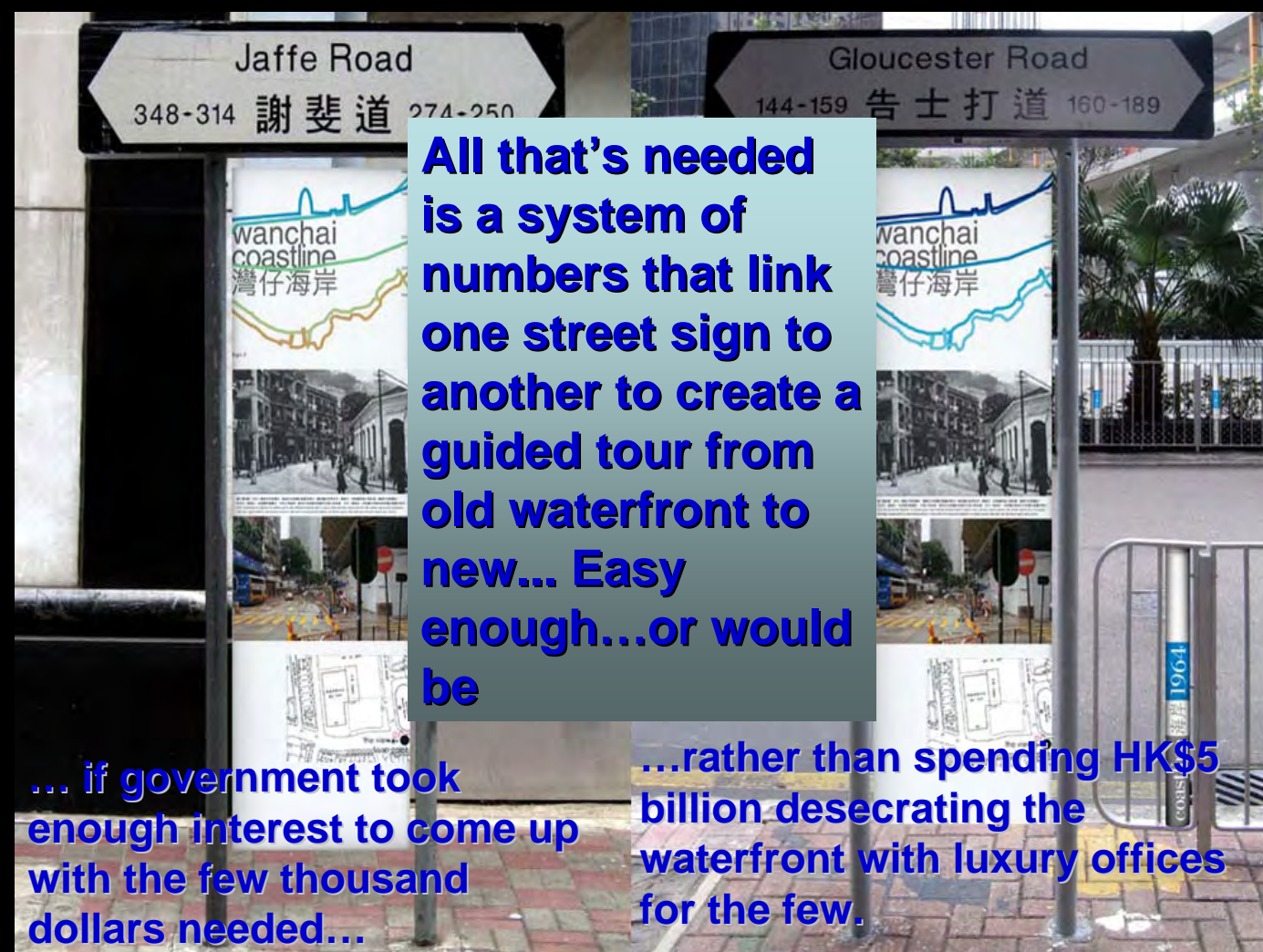


This is what Wanchai District Council is hoping to do to enhance its street signs...


Because today's waterfront, as one strolls its tree-shaded walkways, its gardens and promenades, its cafés and restaurants, marinas and piers, should be the logical end of trails from the older waterfront. It would express both continuity with and the change from the past.

The kernel is already there. While I was dreaming of this idea, the Wanchai District Council had already begun work. They'd identified their successive shorelines...

logo 2



...and see a way to create a much better designed set of plaques than my crude version. Signs like this would make it simple to create a series of 'heritage trails', enhanced by audio-tours and well-informed guides. These would lead people laterally along ancient water fronts, via their plaques and panels with information and maps. From them, radially, trails could branch back to an older shoreline – or through more recent waterfronts to the present shoreline. There, on a new, humanized, historically sensitive waterfront, revelatory of a pride and interest in our territory's maritime past, would be the latest chapter in the evolving story.



Use Hong Kong's historic
waterfronts to connect past
to present.

**Let one of the most
beautiful harbours in the
world tell its story.**

Picking up on an earlier hint, this approach, if adopted now, would also help in the campaign to rescue the harbour. With a network of heritage trails leading to...well just now nothing at all bar expressways, ferry piers, fences and high rises...the manifest barbarism of Hong Kong's existing non-policy would be glaringly evident. Developing the palimpsest of the hinterland would draw dramatic attention to the failure of planning and thought expressed by the present non-waterfront. The past would become a lever on the present.

Designing a harbour on this principle forces it to be or become what it should ideally be. An outdoor extension – a living gallery – of a maritime museum. To a culturally and historically sensitive society that values its roots, it is the only way to go. All that is needed is a body with the vision, knowledge and power to ensure that we go no further down the blind alley of the new Hong Kong's ideology – negative non-interventionism.