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Peter Kammerer

Peter Kammerer says the north Australian city's riverfront development highlights how Hong Kong has ignored the value of public space

Hong Kong's high civil service pay, we have been repeatedly told, equates to excellent public service. The unexceptional state of Victoria Harbour says otherwise. Few places have a more stunning natural asset, yet there has been little effort to turn it over to public enjoyment. The concreted walkways and pocket-sized parks that dot its shores speak of mediocrity and a lack of vision.

A recent trip to the north Australian city of Brisbane made that obvious. Built along a muddy, brown river, there are no spectacular skyline views or night-time light shows reflected on shimmering waters. Yet the city's council has in two decades turned it from a smelly, polluted waterway to a place of recreation and enjoyment. Where once there were warehouses and dockyards, there are now 20km of floating walkways and bicycle paths, riverside restaurants, parks, gardens and even a beach.

The salaries of Brisbane's lord mayor and 26 councillors are tied to those of state ministers and politicians. They are paid well by Australian standards, but fall far short of the wages of Hong Kong's chief executive and ministers; Leung Chun-ying's annual HK\$4.61 million is 60 per cent more than that made annually by Lord Mayor Graham Quirk. Wages bear no correlation to making a city a pleasant place in which to live, though, if the banks of the Brisbane River are any guide.

A free ferry service makes for leisurely travel between the business and shopping district, riverside eateries and attractions and apartment complexes. I found this out from a retired property agent, who is among 200 volunteer tourist guides who proudly show off the city with free walking tours. Among the places I was taken with a fellow visitor was the Epicurious Garden, a 1,500-square-metre area of land on the river's south bank where herbs and vegetables are grown, largely by volunteers; it is essentially a kitchen garden aimed at showing how to grow food plants sustainably at home. The fresh produce is harvested and given away free from food carts.

It is part of 17.5 hectares of parkland on what had been the site of World Expo 88, cited as a transformative festival for the city. To stage the event, laws were changed that allowed for outdoor restaurants and bars that are now a popular riverfront feature. As well as Epicurious, an art gallery and performing arts complex, there's a man-made beach, grasslands, rainforest, a pagoda, giant wheel, plazas, walkways, a promenade, shops and restaurants.

The area, as with other riverside stretches, is lively and flourishing. Hong Kong's harbourfront is, by comparison, dull and desolate. Tsim Sha Tsui's Avenue of the Stars and the laser light show each evening are the crown jewels, but the unfriendly environment of concrete paving and benches doesn't encourage lingering.

Hong Kong has had many chances to do better - the Central waterfront is one - but government, private retail and even military interests have got in the way. Brisbane, with less than one-third of our population, is by no means the finest example of what can be done, merely an indication of what can happen when a government puts the people it is supposed to serve ahead of self-interest.

Peter Kammerer is a senior writer at the Post

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