

## Interview with Weijen Wang\*

**\*Conducted and/or edited by the Volume Editors.**

Volume Editors: Many people are familiar with the Hong Kong model—explicitly density-focused but providing open and natural environments right next to this density. As a practicing architect and university professor, can you explain to us how this density developed over time?

Weijen Wang: There are different definitions of density; population density is only one. If we look at the density of Hong Kong compared to London in terms of the area of the city and the population, then we see that London is less dense than Hong Kong. This is because of the way Hong Kong is zoned. Within a small city-state island, planners decided that about 70% of the land should be non-urban areas, and about 30% be urban areas. This unique decision made the urban areas of Hong Kong particularly dense. This means that Hong Kong is able to conserve large areas of green land. There is also a historical and environmental reason for that. The island of Hong Kong called 'New Territories' is mostly flat, whereas Hong Kong island primarily has mountains with very few strips of flat land along the coast. That topography determined the way it is, through 200 years of development—it led to urban areas being along the coast, while the mountainous areas are left pristine. When the government started to implement modern planning and zoning, they decided to also take advantage of that. When it, therefore, came to the 'New Territories', they decided to preserve green areas as a country park that takes about almost 50% of the land there and use the remaining lands, which were agricultural for some time, until the population of Hong Kong increased after WWII, turning into a modern city. The demand created for more urban area[s], therefore, led to the idea of 'New Towns' in Hong Kong. For this, the government put in motion some land reclamation programs to gain more flat land and increase the amount of available urban areas. There were about 10 'New Towns'. Housing in these New Towns always included land auctioned to private developers as well as public housing. The income generated through these auctions to private developers, in turn, paid for the infrastructure and the reclamation. This is how the model works: one finds land where reclamation is possible; this is turned into a town of about 1/4 million population; then the planners install infrastructure, including metro stations; once there are two or three metro stations, half of the land is auctioned out to private developers, with the other half reserved for public housing. The problem of this model, however, is the land price.

Because you don't want to release too much land—in fact, it is enshrined in law, the amount that must be kept as a country park—it means that land and private housing prices escalate. This urban model is sustainable in many ways. We already mentioned the large number of green, unbuilt lands. They are concentrated and large. Also because of the high concentration of urban land and tall buildings along the coast and the New Towns, travel distances are reduced. This also means that the best way to get around is through the metro; everyone takes the metro; both the middle-class and blue-collar social groups. It's the most efficient way to get anywhere. With a population of 8 million, the system works very well.

VEs: Do you think contemporary Hong Kong is a sustainable and inclusive model for different social classes?

WW: If we look at the economy, and the way these lands are zoned, of course, the private land—the iconic, signature towers on the waterfront land, which are primarily office buildings, as in other financial cities like New York and Tokyo—get the waterfront, and the public housing is three blocks behind that, but of course, they can all get still get a mountain view. The residential towers, however, are still fairly tall, however—about 40 stories. These are both private and public. Again, through its model, Hong Kong preserved a high percentage of public housing—at least 1/3 of the total housing provision in the city. In the east side of the city is high-end housing, and in the west side of the city is low-income social housing. As in the 'New Towns', the government [was] looking for available land wherever they could get it, and they built public housing. Therefore, some public housing even ended up in inner areas with a fantastic sea view, so in terms of adjacency and location, it was possible to place public housing in a relatively valuable urban land in Hong Kong and Kowloon. This facilitated social mixing.

VEs: Do you think that these ideas of density are transferable, or do you think they are embedded in a system where people have chosen to live in a particular way?

WW: In terms of the culture of accepting a high-density, it's important to point out that Hong Kong is not high density by choice; it developed with Hong Kongers coming from China from high density but low-rise contexts. Gradually, people began to live in towers, and the new generations are born in towers, and for them, high-density towers are a way of life. Nevertheless, the culture can be changed, as elsewhere. In the United States, most people live in suburban contexts, but many New Yorkers have become used to living in towers, which have become a way of

life for them. The other thing is about the way of living in different levels. Of course, when you live in towers and you live in different levels, you're probably on the lift, so whether you get to level 20 or 40, it doesn't make much of a difference anymore. I would assume the less desirable homes are on the lower levels because of the view; this is probably also reflected in housing. From the ground level to about level 5 or 6—these are primarily commercial floors, so building regulation also tended in the way that in this building typology, they also have a podium, which includes car parks and shopping malls up to about the sixth floor. Imagine a birthday cake, with candles on top. Those candles are the towers; on top of the cake, there's then a roof garden. It's like a new Le Corbusier model of the City of Tomorrow. This is the stratification of level. And if you look from the garden all the way, there are also some subtle politics of height; the higher, the richer. Because of these commercial and/or communal facilities on the podium level, the podiums are also connected to each other through sky bridges, creating a three-dimensional urbanism.

VEs: In this high-density, tower context, how does the city deal with the rise of sea levels?

WW: I'm interested in finding out to what extent Hong Kong towers can withstand the rise of sea levels by up to 20 m. The podium would be gone, but could the towers survive? In theory, it would be OK, because people are already about 5–10 m above ground.

VEs: But is Hong Kong currently dealing with issues like that?

WW: Because those buildings are all concrete towers, in the most recent typhoon, the concern was the construction quality of certain structures. Windows were often breaking, but the buildings were not falling apart; they are pretty strong. But there are also other forms of disasters that Hong Kong is currently dealing with. Our protestors very effectively block the metro when they want, so the whole transportation system collapses, meaning that the city also collapses.

VEs: And in terms of protests, are there also claims from the population regarding the bigger picture of climate change? Are issues of sustainability and [the] environment more visible there than elsewhere?

WW: Current protests are not directly related to environmental questions; they are primarily about social issues like democracy and human rights. The pressure put

on Hong Kong by China are mostly behind this. There is an interesting breakdown in terms of who is participating in the protests, and how. The top-earning 10% are quite conservative and don't want to change anything, and it's probably the bottom-earning 20% that are the most radical, for whom this is more than about democracy, but also about changing the whole social and economic structure, because they cannot afford to live anyway. The middle classes in between want to maintain their ways of life—status quo. As you can see, however, there is not an immediate connection with environmental questions.

VEs: What do you think are the emerging responsibilities for these social groups?

WW: Younger generations—high school and college students, who take major part in the current social movement—care about environmental issues just like any other global citizen. This is one of the main ideological differences between those younger generations, and the ideology that the current Chinese government tries to bring into China, which is more about a stronger national identity, which for the younger generation in Hong Kong, is not an issue at all. They generally don't care. Maybe the previous generation still treasures their cultural heritage. Those who are protesting harbor developments and further reclamation of land are usually green groups who naturally also take part in the political protests we see.

VEs: What is significant about these protests against these waterfront developments?

WW: These developments emerge from the government looking for new land for housing to moderate housing price and provision, but they also raise many questions. Do they benefit the general public more, or do they benefit the developer more? The developer[s], after all, are the top-earning 5–10%, who own most of the resources of Hong Kong. For example, many agricultural lands in New Territory, which were purchased already by developers, are currently being stocked in order to wait to develop residential zones. For the last 20 years, the major battles regarding land issues are between those who wish to preserve agricultural lands and the developers. And this is not only about green land but also about equality, because of the same question: who is benefitting from the continued developments? There [are] also questions about integrating Hong Kong with the broader Great Bay areas and Shenzhen, which the government and China are promoting. The younger generation[s] either don't care, care less, or are very resistant to that. They would ask: who would benefit from that integration? They would lose their local culture and autonomy by joining the larger Chinese development machinery.

VEs: What is the role of non-commercial public space in such a high- density city?

WW: Unlike typical European cities with relatively larger urban public spaces—plazas, and so on—Hong Kong has far fewer. The British did not care so much about making Hong Kong a beautiful colonial city, as in Delhi; it was instead a much more pragmatic land reclamation, auctioning, and development. Ultimately, very little ground was left. For greater pedestrian use, streets should be larger and have more urban parks and plazas. Furthermore, people live in tiny flats, so there is also a great desire to be in the public space. The result is that you always have super-vibrant street life, and many of the infrastructures become public space, such as sky bridges connecting upper levels of shopping malls. When you connect one after another, it is a way to connect public spaces. The urban escalators are another essential example. They are about 400 m from the central business district to the upper-middle-class residential areas. The idea actually comes from traffic engineering. The escalator goes down in the morning, and after 11:00, it goes up, so instead of taking buses or taxis, they can take the escalator. Because it's high density, people can get to places much faster. Talking about sustainability, this is a great example. And these urban links become public space as well, as well as an effective form of urban regeneration, as shops around the escalator also changed. So because of this density, the public spaces begin to take other forms besides the traditional parks and plazas. The shopping plays an interesting role here. They become public spaces, but of course, they are also private. Recent protests help to define this unique condition. Can the security guard of the shopping mall stop the police officer from entering the shopping mall to arrest protestors? There are arguments on both sides. So what are public spaces, and where are riot police entitled to enter? These malls play other critical roles in daily life, too. Old people who live in the towers above, for example, go in the shopping malls during the day to live out their social lives. We must be critical about these spaces but also study them further. I am promoting the idea to relax the plot ratio of towers so that more spaces can be dedicated as public spaces, either accessible by everyone or by the communities of the tower. Ultimately, the aim is to produce more interconnected public space in upper levels.

VEs: There is also the interesting example from the history of Hong Kong of the Kowloon Walled City, which was eventually demolished and became public space. Can public space be formed in the existing density by breaking down buildings or other more radical transformation, as in that example?

WW: One thing to keep in mind is that the high-density areas of Hong Kong are so close to the natural areas of Hong Kong, everyone can relatively easily—in less than 30 min from anywhere in Hong Kong—get to hiking areas for walks and other outdoor activities, so there is ample public space that is not urban for use. In terms of other public urban spaces, however, that example is very unique. It was the historical city of Kowloon, so it was a typical Chinese walled city, like a fortress for military purposes. During the Sino-British agreement to lease Kowloon, the Chinese government at the time were still allowed to hold that military, walled city; it was not within the jurisdiction of the British, but of the Chinese. It was an exclave. So the colonial government had no titles, so everything was allowed within the boundaries of that walled city. Neither the colonial government's building regulations nor anything like that could penetrate those walls. After several years, when the Chinese government eventually lost control of that land, it still had no land titles by the colonial government. So anyone who had a building in that space could control how tall they wanted it to be. They were allowed to occupy every piece of land illegally because there was no regulation. A dentist from mainland China that could not practice in Hong Kong because of not having a license, could practice there. So poor people went there for affordable facilities—doctors, dentists, and so forth. It became an extremely high density because no one was controlling it; there was extremely small building distance. They built on almost every available piece of land. Circulation was carved out of narrow land and staircases, connecting one building to another, creating a labyrinth in order to continue surviving. The rooftops were the gardens and playgrounds. And this city lasted for about 100 years. During that evolution, however, Hong Kong became a metropolis, and this area became an urban village. The lesson to learn is that the type of three-dimensional city we are advocating for now was there in the unsanitary, sub-standard, unregulated Walled City. I, therefore, see it as a metaphor: Hong Kong turned into a three-dimensional city because it had no choice, but when you start to stack up, you find solutions to move around, finding voids here and there to become public spaces. The question is how to turn this metaphor into a healthy and sustainable model.