

How to make Hong Kong a better place to live

1. Hong Kong's success in a liveable city index published by the Economist Intelligence Unit surprised many, despite the city's world-leading public transport, low crime rate and access to country parks. Numerous large-scale infrastructure projects over the past decade have transformed the city - in physical terms - into a modern metropolis, but it is unclear to whom the benefits of this development are accruing and by whom they are accessible.
2. Liveability is linked to sustainable development. As such, for development to be sustainable, it must address people's long-term livelihoods. Hong Kong's recent record in this area is risible: despite gross domestic product growth of almost 50 per cent between 2001 and 2011 and current government reserves of some HK\$670 billion, median household income in the same period increased by only 10 per cent, so that, today, the city's wealth disparity is one of the highest in the world. Its Gini coefficient of 0.537 is at its historical high.
3. Combine that with general inflation and a staggering increase in property prices of over 80 per cent since 2009, and the result is clear: housing affordability has become non-existent especially among the working youth; absolute poverty has increased, and food price rises - a direct consequence of high rents - have had a devastating impact on the daily nutritional intake of the urban poor. Hong Kong's claim to be a first-world city is rendered absurd by such facts.
4. Despite the severity of these issues, however, it is shortsighted to presume that their alleviation will lead to a greater perception among Hongkongers that their city is a pleasant one in which to live. Factors affecting well-being extend beyond the economic and environmental, encompassing matters as diverse as culture, family, community, architecture, language, urban aesthetics, personal liberty, empowerment and how we respond to the needs of the vulnerable - all of which are intrinsically human. It is in these emotional areas that the impact of urban renewal must be questioned. Hong Kong's self-appointed title of "Asia's world city" is an irrelevance to most citizens, for whom development has meant the obliteration of the vibrant and colourful home built by their parents, and the evaporation of self-determinism as their lives become controlled by our corporate juggernauts. The local catchphrase, "this city is dying", is revealing.
5. We must be more ambitious in our critique. The passion of the Hongkongers who tried to save the old Central Ferry Pier demonstrated how culture contributes to happiness, and "preservation" like 1881 Heritage should be exposed for the profit-driven nonsense that it is.
6. Similarly, while biodiversity may be one indicator of sustainability, what of commercial diversity? The plethora of small businesses that once were the essence of Hong Kong were not only better at addressing people's economic needs than are the price-fixing monopolies so dominant today, but also served an important emotional need: be it through local ownership, diversity of produce selection, or the personalised service of shopkeepers. Sham Shui Po may be our city's poorest district economically, described as "an area of serious urban decay", but in terms of emotional intensity and cultural value, it is one of our richest.

7. It is a richness that's being lost in other districts, with the proliferation of shopping malls at almost every train station, bus terminus, ferry pier or residential complex. The brutish design of many of these malls - from Mong Kok to Causeway Bay - destroys surrounding street life and social fabrics. Although a similar development is occurring in other cities, the situation in Hong Kong - where store space is increasingly tailored to the purchasing habits of mainland visitors and not the day-to-day needs of locals inhabitants, and where this is combined with insidious urban planning that forces pedestrians into and through these malls to reach their destinations - is unique in its near-total absence of respect towards locals.
8. Real sustainability is less about formulaic templates and adherence to reporting requirements than it is about ensuring that development serves people's needs, including their emotional needs. Such sensitive policymaking depends on an ability to ascertain the source of people's emotional well-being, and then tailoring development to promote it.
9. The proliferation and intensification of public protests, and the relatively high rates of suicide, domestic violence and drug abuse in many of our satellite towns - despite the beautiful nature surrounding most of them - demonstrates the ineffectiveness of current approaches in integrating people into the planning process.
10. This philosophy applies equally to the large corporations that implement the development process, against whom so much hostility is directed: obtaining a level of disclosure on corporate social responsibility may satisfy the demands of investors, but the danger is that the end goal becomes this, rather than what truly matters - a human-centric strategy that leads to responsive management.
11. Few small-business owners forced out by aggressive rental increases are likely to care about the sustainability rating achieved in the annual reports of the corporations managing their premises. Yet these small business owners, connected to local communities in a way that no large organisation can be, operate at the sharp end of both environmental and social sustainability.
12. If Hong Kong's companies and policymakers are to make a genuine attempt at engaging these people, they might find that they are provided with an unrivalled source of information on just what makes this city liveable, and so go some way to making the development of Hong Kong more sustainable for all.