

THE INDUSTRY BIBLE FOR UK HOUSEBUILDERS & DEVELOPERS

# DEVELOPER & HOUSEBUILDER YEARBOOK 2021



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One Kai Tak, a private luxurious residential development in Hong Kong's Kai Tak Development Zone, designed by LWK + PARTNERS



# STREET RENAISSANCE

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Are British cities benefiting from densification? As the vertical trend starts to hit areas outside central London, how can we uphold people's quality of life in these future developments? As the COVID-19 pandemic and related lockdowns have highlighted the critical roles of naturally ventilated spaces and being connected with other people for physical and mental wellbeing, it is perhaps time-relevant to review the potential of our public realms.

Whether we are talking about a place to live, work or play, the industry should recast their sight on the vast possibilities brought by open-air streets as a key site for social connection, or healthy daily life in general. Especially in highly dense urban contexts, reinvigorating the long-lost human touch can mean a greater sense of place and belonging, which also ties in with society's calls to prioritise pedestrians over cars. The



**Above:** A retail development in Shenzhen, China visited by HC Chan

wise use of the public realm can drive successful developments through strategies to create walkable, human-scale places with an enhanced sense of vibrancy and community.

**Breaking the building envelope**

Streets are a key part of the public realm, which also acts as the veins of community life. However, in London and other post-industrial cities of the UK, Urban Regeneration/Renewal has inevitably led to a sprawl of enclosed vertical city, leaving native community reeling from the pressure of Gentrification. As people are physically isolated from one another in their homes, social networks start falling apart, taking a toll on people's mental wellbeing. This trend should be revamped with aim of injecting energy to the neighbourhood and upgrading the identity of the district. Future sustainable, walkable and healthy cities should include the street as part of their circulation planning, breaking up the building envelope through setbacks, balconies or

wide-open ground floors to keep the street environment in view and at hand, thereby nurturing vibrancy and promoting diversified activities on grade. The presence of open-air balconies can make a difference to the experience of living indoors. People should be allowed to have direct sensation of the outside world, receiving sunlight, wind and the bustling sounds of life downstairs. It is a three-dimensional extension of the streetscape that is not only environmentally sound, but constructive for intergenerational living. Street-level shops and shopping arcades – as opposed to enclosed and homogenous shopping malls – create opportunities for local businesses, while their kaleidoscopic display windows make up a wide range of visual stimulations that contribute to a unique identity for the neighbourhood. Covered archways stand as weather-proof sheltered spaces providing shades and rest spaces for passers-by. Keeping

these spaces alive is therefore vital for maintaining a high level of social cohesion. Inspiration can be taken from Hong Kong's indigenous community planning and vernacular architecture from the pre-war era. Rows of composite buildings were built side by side, forming spectacular retail colonnades that makes up a signature of old Hong Kong and which takes a key seat in the community's collective memory.

**Case in point: paradigm shift in Hong Kong community planning**

Hong Kong serves as a prime example of high-density environments for understanding how a sea change in community planning approach might revitalise the street. The past 20 years for Hong Kong have seen a phenomenal typology of commercial podiums topped with high-rise residential towers, where footbridges linking clusters of shopping malls and residential estates have become the key connectivity for people. By contrast, street frontages are mainly occupied by plant rooms where people rarely visit. The striking sight of desolate streets has led to a paradigm shift in community planning for the city. In the Kai Tak new area, made up of land vacated from the retired Kai Tak Airport, buildings are pushed unprecedentedly back into their respective sites to open up street spaces. Building heights are controlled to minimise the blocking of views, while site coverage is reduced so that pavements can be broadened. Land lots are carefully planned in Grid Neighbourhood patterns and will be developed into a specially designed harmonious residential area, comprising low and high blocks with varying rhythmic disposition and building façade treatment, in a bid to create a dynamic skyline and foster a

stronger sense of belonging to the community. These residential buildings are positioned with certain distances apart to create visual and wind corridors, thus directing sea breeze into the city centre, improving air ventilation and mitigating street canyon effect and urban heat island effect. Five-metre setbacks are reserved for greening with ecological elements on both sides of the revitalised Kai Tak River, which meanders through the heart of the district, to create additional recreational space for residents and provide a habitat for birds and other creatures. A positive reconnection between nature and human can be rekindled through co-existence of natural environment and built city. Taking a bicycle ride around Kai Tak and exploring en route the new landscape at the former airport is a wish shared among Hong Kong people. A shared path for pedestrians and cyclists called 'GreenWay' is installed to connect Kwun Tong Promenade and Kai Tak New District in order to realise people's cycling wish and enhance recreational value in the district. The GreenWay is planning to connect with neighbouring districts through a cycling track network to encourage regular exercise in the wider coverage of scenic spots. LWK + PARTNERS is the architect of the 2018-completed One Kai Tak residences, one of the practice's 10 ongoing or completed projects in the district that is still taking shape. Tall buildings are arranged to maximise views of the famous Victoria Harbour; and buildings are planned as far apart as possible to increase privacy for residents. To create a green, sustainable and sensible community for all, residential blocks are connected with public spaces through retail colonnades and lush landscape, contributing to the area's slow



*Above: Tsuen Wan Sports Centre, Hong Kong*

mobility system and encouraging people to get outside under the sun.

**Future human-oriented and green retail**

In planning for vertical retail developments, the inclusion of street elements can be a strategy for preserving local cultural character while offering a human-oriented, efficient consumer experience. Some newer developments have already adopted a 'semi-open' approach and multidirectional circulation system to invoke the street experience. Large building volumes are bisected into smaller-scale cluster blocks in the style of shopping villages; semi-open interfaces feature glass curtain walls, transparent canopies or naturally ventilated corridors. Circulation takes place on ground level or via interconnected walkways to promote the kind of horizontal, free-flow, boundless navigation experience offered by the street to put on an engaging shopper experience. Further, adoption of green walls, lush landscape and natural materials may

promote ventilation and sunlight reception, reducing energy consumption. It is expected that this Biophilic Design approach to restore the cherished relationship with nature will be embraced more widely to inform urban development. In short, buildings are not just objects; they are statements that represent the common values of a society. To create future communities with life, energy and style, it is time that the industry reconsiders the impact of vertical built environments on our way of life and social dynamics. It seems promising to look to our streets for inspiration and preserve these vessels of cultural diversity as the main site of daily life and a highly walkable environment.

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*Above: The emerging Kai Tak Development Zone in Hong Kong*