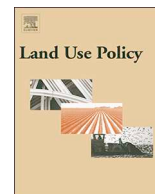




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Quality of life in a “high-rise lawless slum”: A study of the “Kowloon Walled City”

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ABSTRACT

Informed by the ‘quality of life’ model with specific reference to Chinese culture, this article uses reliable and publicly available information seldom used in historical or heritage study to identify the designs of flats and builders of the “Kowloon Walled City” (hereafter the City) and reliable oral testimonies to refute some myths about the quality of life within it. This settlement has been notoriously misrepresented by some as a city of darkness that was razed from the face of the Earth before 1997 to fulfill a pre-war dream of the colonial government. This article confirms the view that this extremely short-lived concrete jungle, mystified as a horrifying, disorderly-built, and unplanned territory, was a product of un-organised small builders that had been hitherto unreported. The layout and designs of the housing units were different from that prescribed by the *Buildings Ordinance*, but were, in fact, developed within a consciously planned boundary that was a result of international politics. Although the City’s overall built environment was poor due to a lack of natural light penetration, the designs of its individual flats were comparable, if not better than, typical units in contemporary public rental housing blocks, many of which had to be demolished less than 20 years after their construction due to structural defects. This article uses the ‘quality of life’ model, which has hitherto been limited to medical and social, rather than historical or anthropological, studies, to evaluate how design and housing satisfaction affected City residents’ quality of life.

1. Introduction: some popular myths about “Kowloon Walled City” as an anarchy

There are two famous places that have been wrongly used as examples in class to showcase the effects of complete laissez faire: Houston and the “Kowloon Walled City” (the City). The former was praised as being “un-zoned,” while the latter was condemned as an example of the ill effects of complete anarchy. The reality is that Houston has been “privately zoned,” which is an accurate, but, rather un-libertarian, expression that was used to refer to Milwaukee before Siegan’s work on Houston appeared. The latter was actually the outcome of rational maximization subject to clearly delineated boundaries of a settlement without a subdivision plan (Lai and Hansley Chua, 2017). This article probes the “quality of life” of the dwellers of what Girard and Lambot (2014) called a “City of Darkness.”

To set the scene, there is a need to remove some general misunderstandings of the City, the first of which is that it was completely *unplanned and ignored* by the colonial government due to an international dispute between China and Britain over the jurisdiction of this

former Qing (Ch’ing) Dynasty fort. It is a common misconception that the City was not subject to any government control or service. Although the enclave’s political sensitivity meant that “municipal regulations were more often merely suggested than enforced” (Girard and Lambot, 2014, p.104), the government imposed tight sanctions against excessive building heights on the grounds of aviation safety (as Kai Tak Airport was located nearby), provided postal service to, and curbed drug trafficking in the settlement (Lai and DeGolyer, 2018).

The second myth is that the City became a dense, high-rise concrete jungle almost immediately following the Second World War and lasted until it was demolished in 1993. Saywell alleged that taller structures, once profit margins could be achieved, predominated during the “latter part of the 1950s and early ‘60s” and that the City “had filled out to its maximized form” by the 1970s (Saywell, 2014, p.118).

Neither is historically accurate. Research on the planning for the City, based on archival materials, revealed that the colonial and Chinese Governments actively planned its development and controlled its final built form (Lai et al., 2017). The colonial government tightly controlled the horizontal and vertical boundaries of every building

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there, rendering the resultant structure a rough cubical mass with its outermost boundaries more or less limited within the thicker old walls of this former fort.

The image of the City, as popularly propagated and socially constructed, presumes a certain way of delineating its “true boundaries,” which is a fertile research area awaiting further and better analysis. The official post-war policy was to confine its boundaries within the alignment of the original stone walls of the main fort on lower grounds, while ignoring a triangular uphill portion defined by two thin walls and the northern wall of the main fort (Lai, 2016). All of the City’s walls were cannibalised by the Japanese occupiers during the war to expand Kai Tak Aerodrome using prisoners of war as labour.

This official policy was concretised by the construction of Tung Tau Tsuen Road (東頭村道) to the north, Carpenter Road to the south, Junction Road to the west, and Tung Tsing Road (東正道) to the east. The ‘Nunnery Scheme’ was a plan approved in 1969 by the Director of Public Works to surround this policy of the City, which was encircled by these four roads with developments on all four sides including a high-rise, low-cost public housing estate built by the Resettlement Department. This was intended to encourage residents of the City to surrender their land rights in exchange for governmental rental flats (Lai, 2016).

The iconicity of the City as a high-rise concrete mass was, in fact, just a short 20-year phenomenon that emerged during the early 1970s and disappeared completely by 1994, as evidenced by aerial photographs (Lai et al., 2017). These 20-odd years were just a brief moment in the City’s 147-year history from 1847, when the fort was completed, to the final clearance of its housing blocks in 1994. As can be seen from aerial photos and government documents at the Public Records Office (PRO), the City comprised low-rise squatter huts well into the 1960s and its transition from “village houses” to high-rise apartment blocks built of reinforced concrete began only around 1970.

The concept quality of life is frequently found in sociological (urban ecology) and medical (community health) research using questionnaire surveys of some commonly agreed or asserted criteria as in the ranking of world cities. This article applies the concept to land development using archival materials and oral testimonies to fathom the satisfaction of residents living in a particular neighbourhood. It posits that satisfaction with the different features of the neighbourhood (particularly social and physical) affected different domain satisfactions, which, in turn, affected life satisfaction (Sirgy and Cornwell, 2012). As a residential settlement, the City provided its inhabitants with a higher quality of life than their previous dwellings, as the authors will demonstrate in the following interviews they conducted with former residents.

There is no universally accepted definition of ‘quality of life’ and the authors’ research mainly focused on an extensive range of topics including individual physical and mental health, well-being, satisfaction, family, work, housing, social relations, political and cultural lives, and social ethics, amongst others (Chan et al., 2005, p.260). This article will, therefore, assess the quality of life of City residents and their respective satisfaction with its housing, the surrounding neighbourhood, and community via the designs of its units, with the aim of dispelling the City’s often misinterpreted ‘City of Darkness’ image. This attempt to probe the actual conditions of the City is significant because even most people familiar with Hong Kong think the City was lawless in the sense that it featured huge, if not complete, rent dissipation due to a Hobbesian state of affairs with an un-imaginable harsh living environment. How bad was the situation? That the high-rise “slum” involved sophisticated real estate construction suggests that complete rent dissipation was entirely out of question. But it still opens up the question regarding the quality of life.

The article will also reflect on the doctrines of modern architecture earlier in the 20th Century, particularly the discourses on form and function. Overall, it can be argued that the City was a highly-functional settlement to live in. In 1923, noted modern architect Le Corbusier

(1986) famously proclaimed that, “a house is a machine for living in” in his influential book, *Vers une Architecture* (Towards a New Architecture). His early designs included the Villa Savoye (1928-31) in France – noted for its open floor plan, functional roof, and continuous horizontal window strip, which were elements in his “Five Points of New Architecture” (Le, 1986). This is considered a prototype for functional architecture. In 1933, during the fourth meeting of CIAM (*Congrès internationaux d’architecture moderne*, formed in 1928) in Athens, participating members of the international Modern Movement discussed issues that defined a functional approach to modern city planning (Somer et al., 2007). Interestingly, an earlier meeting in 1930 had a theme of ‘rational lot development’, which included Le Corbusier’s notion of increasing building densities and fellow architect Walter Gropius’ (1883–1969) proposal of ‘high land utilization’. Both architectural elements were evident in the City (Mumford, 2002). There is a good reason to bring to light urbanism, as urbanists promoted functional living much earlier. It is, therefore, interesting to compare the proposals informed by functionalism and ‘rational lot planning’ during the early 20th Century with what actually happened in the City to reflect the correspondence of theory to reality. The following sections will continue to discuss the City in light of the above conceptual model and contexts of urbanism in modern architecture.

2. The quality of life model applied to a Chinese environment

“Quality of life” is measured around the world using various scales from nations down to cities. Nowadays, these statistics are often used to promote a city for economic development. These aspects for determining the quality of life for a locale can also help measure the happiness in and satisfaction with it (Rogerson, 1999, p.979). In 1995, Bowling conducted a study on what constituted the most important aspects of life for people living in Britain and found that the top three aspects were relationships with family or relatives followed by one’s own health (or that of a significant other) and one’s finances or standard of living, including housing (Bowling, 1995, p.1451). The survey also revealed that out of 12 aspects, environmental aspects such as noise, safety, and cleanliness were ranked the least important in determining one’s quality of life. In other words, Bowling’s survey showed that satisfaction with a surrounding environment was not as important to the average Briton’s overall happiness as his/her living quarters. Since the 1960s, the ‘quality of life’ concept became an extensively discussed subject across academic domains and developed into a major concern of the public, as well as for governments worldwide (Andrews, 2005; Diener and Rahtz, 2000; Veenhoven, 2000).

The concept of quality of life also has a long history in research on Hong Kong, which could be traced, for instance, to the work of Newcombe et al. (1978) and has been applied by several Hong Kong social scientists to housing affordability, unemployment, and the environment, amongst other domains, to form a “Quality of Life Index” (Chan et al., 2005). More recently, the Asian Urban-Wellbeing Indicators was launched by a think-tank in Hong Kong to measure how much people cared about and were satisfied with ten different policy domains including housing, education, environmental protection, community and belonging, etc. Its first report was published in 2016 (Lai et al., 2016).

In this context, there is a particular reason to study the City as a Chinese settlement because “existing research studies on quality of life are predominantly conducted in the West and there is a strong need to conduct quality of life research in different Chinese communities” (Shek, 2010:357). Because Hong Kong has such a high urban density, many have made explicit reference to the City in terms of *quality of life*. Examples include Kwok (1991); Chu and Uebegang (2002), Smart (2001), Cox (2004), Zhu (2004), Chow (2012), Lau and Yeung Sunnie (2013), and Lehmann (2016). Most of these authors condemned the City for its poor quality of life and/or high density (Kwok, 1991; Lau and Yeung Sunnie, 2013; Lehmann, 2016). None actually reported its

correct population. Generally, authors considered the City a completely “lawless” place (see, for instance, [Zhu \(2004\)](#), which is to say, *anarchic*. This proposition is hardly intelligible, as that would end up in complete rent dissipation and no high-rise development (which involves substantial investment) would have been carried out to accommodate that many people in the first place!

Some obviously laboured under wrong assumptions or information. [Smart, \(2001: p.36\)](#) referred to the City’s buildings as over 20 storeys high. This was not true, as explained below. [Lehmann \(2016\)](#) claimed that “some residents never left the superblock,” suggesting a situation of *autarky*. This is misleading, as the City was never an isolated ghetto or independent of Hong Kong. There is one work by [Cox \(2004\)](#) that used the City as a world example to support a high density quality of life in western urban development. That the City might have well been a place of Schumpeterian innovation ([Andersson and Andersson, 2017](#)) under less than perfect property rights ([Lai et al., 2017](#)) is an important research area, but this paper shall focus on the effects of private development and investment in real estate investment in relation to quality of life.

3. Historical context and constraints of the City’s vertical growth

Interestingly, many commentators ignored the socio-economic context of this spectacular sudden burst of high-rise redevelopment in the City. Past emphasis focused on how its buildings evolved organically, which fascinated both architects and urbanists. A case in point is the studies made by the Chinese architectural firm, Urbanus, to show how buildings within the City might have been linked by bridges to create informal routes on various levels ([Saywell, 2014, p.134](#)). Another renowned study by architect Suenn Ho demonstrated the organic growth of the City after an examination of the architectural plans for individual units, rooftops, and alleyways ([Ho, 1993](#)). These writings, however, stemmed from studies of the late or finalised architectural and urban forms of the City.

The vertical outburst of the City actually coincided with the announcement in 1972 by Governor Murray MacLehose of the first ten-year housing programme in the aftermath of the 1967 Riot ([Pryor, 1983](#)). MacLehose’s governorship is well-remembered for the establishment, on 15 February 1974, of the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) to curb corruption in the civil service. His administration tied housing to new town development in the New Territories during a period of rapid, export-led economic expansion and major urban restructuring. The aim of the ten-year housing programme was to provide each household with a self-contained unit built of permanent materials – notably toilets and kitchens in high-rise concrete buildings. Besides, during MacLehose’s tenure, Britain and the U.S. normalized their diplomatic relationships with China, thereby reducing the tensions of the Cold War in Asia. Hence, the City was an urban product produced in the midst of a very vibrant and growing economy during a relatively stable period. During this moment of history, planner Sir Peter Hall visited Hong Kong and he later recollected:

“I was invited to Hong Kong to advise on the setting up of an urban studies and planning programme within the university (of Hong Kong). Apart from a brief visit to Japan in 1970, this was the first visit I had made to the Far East. I was totally mesmerized by the energy, the power, the achievement of the place. Most surprising for me was the achievement: expecting a Third World sort of country, I found a city that in many ways was more advanced than London....” ([Hall, 1996: p.6](#), brackets added by authors¹)

Hong Kong’s phenomenal economic growth during the post-war period can be measured partly by the increase in its population, which rose from 600,000 in 1945 at the end of the Japanese occupation to nearly four million by 1969 ([Podmore, 1971, p.26](#)). Its estimated Gross Domestic Product (GDP) increased eightfold between 1948 and 1968, with the most rapid period of growth coming during the 1960s ([Podmore, 1971, p.28](#)), which also witnessed the formation of a highly

industrial labour workforce of 1.5 million employees by 1968, 0.6 million of whom were engaged in manufacturing and the remaining 0.9 million in commerce, construction, services, agriculture and fishing, communications, and public utilities ([England, 1971, p.234](#)).

It was also during the late 1960s that the City began to undergo high-rise private reconstruction, as developers started building new modular structures on sites cleared of their two to three-storey huts or houses. A fire that broke out in the City on 11 January 1950 destroyed around 2700 squatter huts that were mostly made of wood, matting, and tarred felt materials that were particularly combustible ([Smart, 2006, p.59](#)). These were significantly different from the residential structures built throughout the City during the late 1960s, which were made of reinforced concrete, relatively fireproof, and rose to heights of at least 12 storeys by the early 1970s. It was around this time that the City experienced its transformation from squatter settlement to the high-rise entity for which it is known.

Building heights of private developments constructed under the *Buildings Ordinance* were generally up to six storeys before the 1960s, as the demand for housing was relatively low. The foundations of buildings with fewer than six storeys were simpler and these buildings enjoyed the flexibility of only providing a single staircase under the *Buildings Ordinance* and its regulations. Building heights within the City remained low until the late 1960s, after which new construction rapidly shot upwards – reaching 13 storeys by the end of the 1970s ([Lai et al., 2017, p.389](#)). Further vertical growth was strictly and effectively prohibited by the government under the Airport Heights Restrictions that protected the descent paths for aircraft to nearby and expanding Kai Tak Airport. These restrictions preserved for the entire Kowloon Peninsula its unique uniform building silhouette until 1998, when Kai Tak closed and Chek Lap Kok Airport commenced operations away from the city centre.

4. The design and quality of the City’s flats

To ascertain the standard of the design of the average flat in and the background of the builders of the City, the authors’ archival research first involved an examination of the relevant documents available at the PRO. Starting with a confidential report compiled by the Royal Hong Kong Police (RHKP), they obtained sketches of nine building units: one for Building No.24 on Tung Tau Tsuen Road (東頭村道), five for Nos.40–43 on West City Road (西城路), and three for the buildings on 19 Shun Yee Lane (信義里) and 3 Cheung On Lane (長安里).¹ The sizes of the flats in Building No.24, which had two light wells by its staircase, ranged from 280 to 450 square feet and each had a toilet and kitchen. Those flats on West City Road had more internal partitions and probably internal kitchens and toilets. The flats on Shun Yee Lane and Cheung On Lane had areas ranging from 300 to 350 square feet. They are presented in [Fig. 1](#).

The authors also inspected other flat layouts, as found in publications on the City. Most notable were the layouts of five flats shown in [Kani’s \(1997: p.31\)](#) book, which has a very detailed photo and cross-sectional survey of a sample of the City’s buildings prior to its demolition. They are presented in [Fig. 2](#). In general, the layouts violated many aspects of the then-existing building regulations. The irregular widths of staircases as a means of escape, landing designs between staircases, lighting, ventilation of bathrooms, etc., did not satisfy the *Buildings Ordinance* at the time.

The width of the staircase in [Fig. 2](#) was only 600 mm, while 900 mm should have been the minimum. This building featured winder (tapered) steps with irregular risers and tread widths and there was no properly-sized landing between staircases. Two steps in the middle of a stair flight, instead of a proper landing, led to the entrance of one of the

¹ File HKRS396/1-4. *Development of Buildings – Kowloon Walled City*, Public Records Offices, pp.89, 106; File Ref. (81) in K/KC/CON/262/3 II and (82) in CDO/KC 9/98c IV.

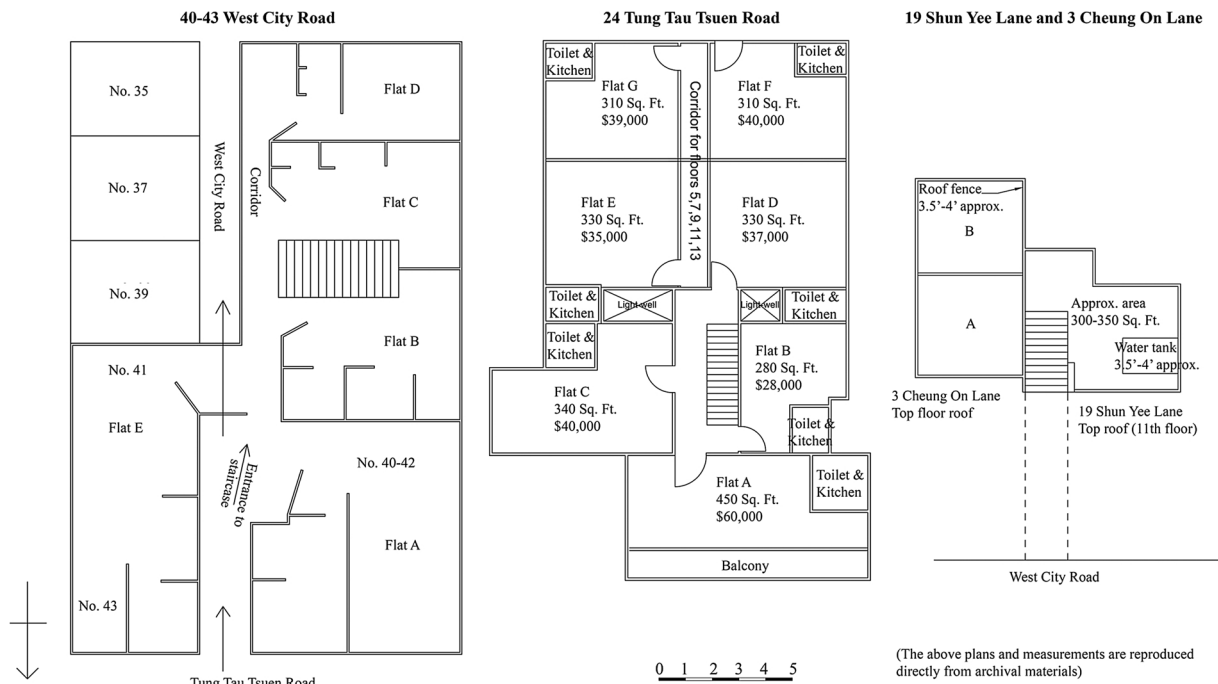


Fig. 1. Flat layouts in Kowloon Walled City retrieved from Public Records Office, Hong Kong.

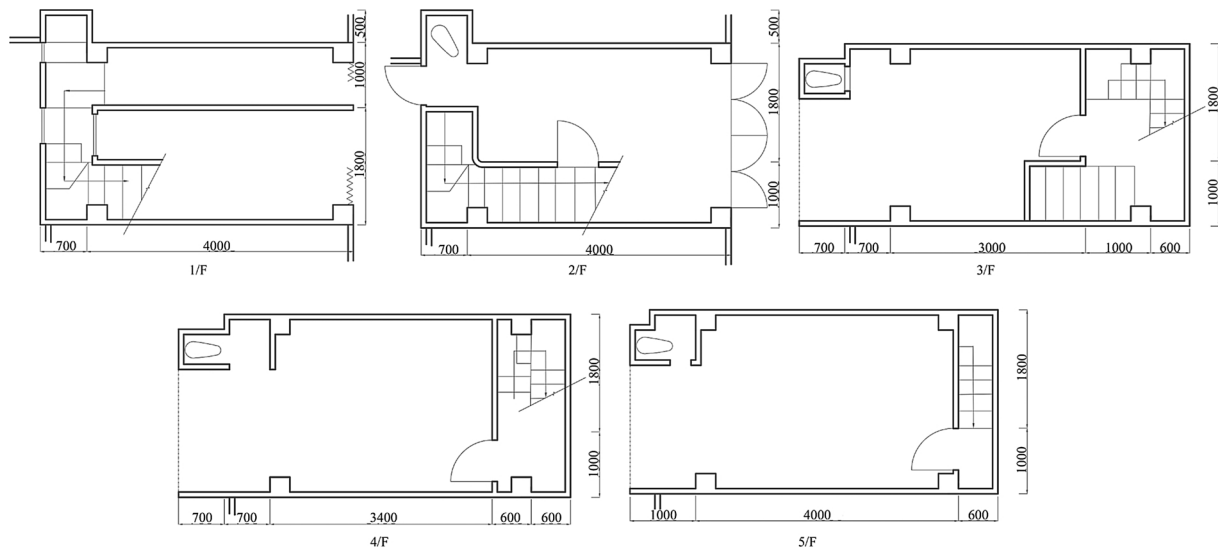


Fig. 2. Layouts of a five-storey building in Kowloon Walled City as shown in Kani's (1997) book.

flats. There did not seem to be proper lighting and ventilation for the toilets, kitchens, and habitable rooms.

The authors then compared these designs to the standard drawings for typical Mark IV resettlement public housing units of the mid-1970s, as shown in Fig. 3. These were recorded in the Housing Department's publication, *Estate Property*, and can be found in Dwyer's 1971 casebook on Hong Kong (p.44). The design of the Mark IV incorporated a central corridor on each floor instead of the external common balconies found in previous resettlement blocks. This allowed for individual private balconies as well as toilets (Dwyer, 1971, p.41).

By the mid-1970s, average building height had increased to 10 storeys and access to individual units was via lifts from an interior centralized corridor. At the City, a similar corridor also served as the main circulation and point-of-access for individual flats. The size of a typical Mark IV housing unit was 120 square feet for a family of five, which was substantially smaller than that for a typical City flat (Dwyer,

1971, p.40). In comparison, while each City flat was equipped with a toilet and kitchen, it lacked its own balcony. In one of the City's sample layouts, a light well was found in the crossing of the centralized corridor and stairwell.

Scholars have criticized Hong Kong's public housing program as merely a means of squatter control and not based primarily on the need to assist low-income families to obtain decent housing (Dwyer, 1971, p.46). It may be concluded that while the City's overall built environment in terms of disposition and individual block layout was inferior to that of public housing, as its buildings were packed together, the size and internal layout of City units were superior. This can be assessed in terms of general housing quality, as a screening survey on urban blight by Pryor² gave the highest penalty point range of 76–100 to tertiary

² Edward Pryor retired as Principal Government Town Planner from the Planning Department in 1999.

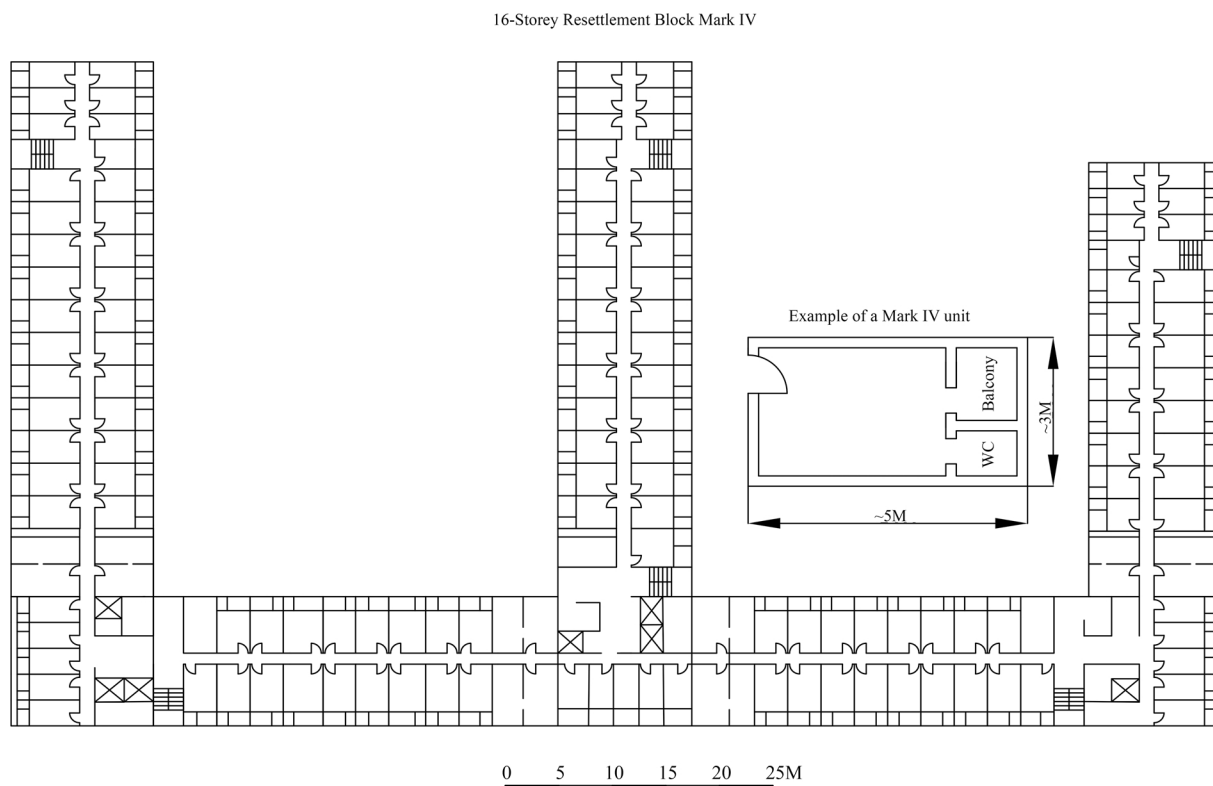


Fig. 3. Layouts of a Mark IV Resettlement Block shown in Dwyer's (1971) book.

planning unit 2.8.5, within which the City's buildings stood (Pryor, 1971, pp.84-85). The time of the survey coincided with the commencement of the City's rapid redevelopment into a high-rise settlement.

Furthermore, flats in the City by the mid-1970s were all self-contained in buildings built of reinforced concrete with an average size of 300–400 square feet. By 1972, the government identified a total of 602 buildings in the City, including 39 along the so-called sensitive zone on its eastern periphery. (Lai et al., 2017) This zone was "outside the wall" of the eastern part of the original fort. Although the government did not treat it as under Chinese jurisdictional protection, it tacitly accepted its continuation. The City's overall population density remained constant from 1972 to 1983.³ As Hopkins commented in his 1971 book *Hong Kong: The Industrial Economy*, life in squatter settlements such as the City had, in fact, certain advantages over that in many overcrowded private tenements (Hopkins, 1971, p.284). The advantages found by Hopkins, based on interviews, were freedom from rent paying, less crowded conditions, and the re-creation of a former village environment in China. Moreover, overcrowding also existed in government resettlement estates. According to a 1968 survey, over 350,000 people living in government estates had less than 24 square feet per adult, which was considered the minimum for human habitation (Hopkins, 1971, p.303).

More importantly, there was no report stating that the buildings in the City were unsafe or structurally defective when its fate was sealed in 1987 after about 17 years of construction. This was so even after the colonial government considered what could befall it (building collapse, fire, disease outbreak, and a plane crash) and how to manage any of these disasters.⁴ It appears to the authors that the extra safety measures taken to construct City buildings could be partly due to a fear of

collapse, but also because the buildings were so tightly packed that they collectively formed a stable collective formwork that could stand firm.

In comparison, due to massive corruption, many public rental buildings were found to be structurally unsound during the mid-1980s and up to 27 of them had to be demolished. Furthermore, over 411 blocks built before 1986 required costly periodic maintenance to prevent their collapse.⁵ Directed by Governor Edward Youde, the ICAC investigated this scandal, but could prosecute and convict only four junior officers and a contractor (Wong 1999). Table 1 lists 25 public housing blocks that were demolished within 20 years of their completion.

To better understand the quality of the City's flats, the second author interviewed a former resident of the squatter area outside the old City walls, who was also the husband of his sister. This interviewee obtained a degree in architecture from the University of Hong Kong during the 1970s and retired as a directorate-grade town planner from the Planning Department. His sister married a resident of a village house in the City and her mother-in-law purchased a new flat in 1974 on the sixth floor of a new ten-storey high-rise near Tung Ching Road. His narrative matched that of his sister's husband, a taxi driver who was also interviewed.⁶ The first marital home of the second interviewee and sister of the first interviewee was a subletted room of 80 square feet in the Hung Yip Building, which still stands on Wanchai Road. The rent for that room was \$150/month. The flat they moved into in Kowloon City was Unit C in the Tung Sing Building. This structure abutted Lung Shing Road, which ran parallel to Tung Ching Road. The area of the flat was about 400 square feet with a dining room, two bedrooms, a toilet, and a kitchen.

The second interviewee affirmed that the sale and purchase agreement for the flat, handwritten in traditional Chinese calligraphy on

³ Lai et al. (2016, p.230); Lai et al. (2017, pp.387-388); Jones (2011 p.271). The estimation of the 1986 population was 45,000.

⁴ Defence Branch Secret FCO File. Policy for Emergencies in the Kowloon Walled City. 1969. No.HK K1/31. SCR 5/3371/6OV. Public Records Office, Hong Kong.

⁵ Housing Authority. 1988. Memorandum for the Building Committee: Legal Action – Defective Housing Blocks. Confidential Building Committee Paper No.BC 78/88, file ref. L/M in HD15101 12/107. Public Records Office, Hong Kong.

⁶ Interview by second author, Hong Kong, 19 September 2017.

Table 1
Rental public housing blocks built from the late 1960s to mid-1970s demolished within 20 years of their construction due to structural danger.
Source: Wong and Fai (1999, pp.170–171).

Housing Estate	Building block number	Number of blocks	Demolition date (month/year)	Completion Date (year)	Building Age (no of years)
Wong Chuk Hang	9	1	05/1988	1973	15
Kwai Shing East	18,20	2	07/1989	1973	16
Kwai Fong	9–11	6	09/1987	1971	16
	8		06/1989	1971	18
	1–2		01/1992	1973	19
Kwai Hing	5	3	01/1988	1972	16
	3–4		06/1989	1971	18
Lam Tin	17	5	04/1988	1972	16
	21–24		08/1992	1973–1974	18–19
Pak Tin	14–16	3	08/1989	1971–1972	17–18
Tsz Ching	53	1	11/1990	1971	19
Ko Chiu Road	3–6	4	06/1991	1972–1973	18–19
Shek Pai Wan	2	1	04/1988	1967	21
Sau Mau Ping	36	1	11/1990	1967	21
	Total	27			

classical art paper (*suen chee*) by the developer, was witnessed by a leftist resident body called the “Kowloon Walled City Kaifong Welfare Promotion Association” (hereafter Kaifong Association), which was set up in 1963. The letterboxes for the flats were located in the building entrance on the ground floor after the government extended its postal service to the City. Electricity was purchased from China Light and Power, a franchised power supplier for Kowloon. According to the second interviewee, the flat was priced at \$28,000 by the developer, a Mr. Ngai Kin Wing,⁷ who traded as “Kin Wing Company”. The flat had no internal furnishings, but had windows with steel frames. Residents also had access to well water, upon the payment of a fee to a private water supplier, to wash and flush their wastes, while potable water came from government fire hydrants positioned along public roads outside the City.

The first interviewee visited his sister from time to time and carried a bucket of water obtained from a public fire hydrant up to her flat during each visit. For the first two years of his sister’s residence in the City, she enjoyed good access to natural light and street views, as well as excellent ventilation. These amenities disappeared with the redevelopment of neighbouring village houses. Natural air circulation worsened, but was not accompanied by odors, cement spalling, or any structural concern. In 1976, the mother-in-law sold the flat for \$42,000, according to the second interviewee, to a buyer whose mother lived in the flat above and wanted to live nearby to look after her. The sale was again witnessed by the Kaifong Association. The first interviewee’s sister and her husband, the second interviewee, then moved to Hong Kong Island.

5. The builders of the City’s flats

To fathom the background of the builders of the City’s flats, the authors obtained from the same confidential RHKP report a list of 16 construction firms, along with the names of their responsible persons, one of whom built “Tung Sing Lau,” where the second interviewee resided for a few years. They also found 13 individual groups of builders together with the properties they built inside the City. Most of the

companies and individual builders had addresses inside City properties.

The authors then searched for the names and directors of each company identified from the Company Registry’s databank and established that only three were *public* companies registered with the Company Registry. Tables 2 and 3 present the findings for the building companies and individual builders, respectively.

It should be noted that the data on private companies were not open to the public and builders were not registered unless they worked on government projects. The authors interviewed a colleague whose father was a builder who operated from the 1950s to 1980s. He intimated that his father would not have dared to become involved in the City’s construction, as “it was a very different domain.” This corroborated with police opinion that those builders who built the City had ‘powerful’ connections.

This led the authors to seek testimonies on the City’s construction aspects from a third interviewee, Ms. Chan, who lived in Kowloon City from the 1960s to the early 1980s. She first lived in a basement unit on Tai Chang Street (大井街) before moving to Sai Tau Tsuen (西頭村).⁸ Initially, her parents moved to the City because her father worked on Lion Rock Road in Kowloon City. According to her, the only lighting in the basement apartment on Tai Chang Street came via the functional ventilation grilles on the ceiling, which overlooked the street. Her family of six, including four siblings in total, then moved to a three-bedroom apartment of approximately 700 sq. ft. in Sai Tau Tsuen when she was seven years old in 1965. Her grandmother first purchased the basement unit for several thousand dollars before selling it and purchasing this newly-constructed apartment for \$9500. The government eventually reimbursed her family for over \$300,000 when the City was slated for demolition.

The new apartment was much more spacious and well-ventilated than Ms. Chan’s previous basement unit, as it had windows in every room and a view overlooking Kowloon Tsai Park. Ms. Chan further described the apartment, located on the fourth floor in a ten-story building, as very “sturdy and well-built” and even recalled watching the building’s construction. She described watching the builders use manual labour to dig a very deep foundation, transport the sand, and mix the concrete, which she found highly impressive. She also recalled that while these were not licensed builders, they worked professionally and with great skill, “taking it even more seriously than [those who worked in] public housing construction.”⁹

To put the highly functional living conditions in context, the following narrative of a colonial administrative officer, Gordon Jones, of the City in 1986 prior to its demolition is useful:

“The environment at street level was appalling with open drains, sewers, rats, uneven lanes and dangling, illegal electricity connections. Dirt and squalor in a myriad of ghastly manifestations were everywhere. During one of my visits in the summer, the smell from the open drains and sewers was such that I was almost physically sick. *However, once you entered the buildings and moved away from street level, the environment improved and was not dissimilar to the environments in other districts with a large number of old private tenement buildings.* In addition, many of the high-rise buildings were physically inter-connected so it was possible to walk from one to another through a network of stairs and corridors without touching street level. Very little light penetrated into the Walled City with the exception of a few light wells and the area immediately surrounding the old magistrate’s yamen in the centre of the City. This was the Walled City’s community centre” (Jones, 2011, pp.270–271 *Italics authors’*).

⁸ These two streets were not “gazetted streets” and their names were only known in Chinese. The authors translated them into English for English readers.

⁹ Interview with Ms. Chan by the first author, Shatin District, Hong Kong, 16 September 2017. Original quotation:

「我睇住佢（建築工人）起（城寨樓）。開始起個時候，佢地挖個槽，雖然不是打槽，但係挖得好深，真係挖得好深。材料方面，我細個會撥開沙找貝殼。我覺得真係起得好，好認真。係真材實力的磚、石屎上面吊，睇住佢地打石屎用個盤來攪，無峰窩狀，不會滲水。牆身唔似現在樓宇會滲水……挖得好深，打石屎落去個地基，所以好穩陣。」

⁷ The interview wrote the full name of Mr. Ngai in the second author’s notebook.

Table 2

Details of building companies for the Kowloon Walled City found in the Public Records Office and Company Registry Databank.

Source: General Correspondence Files (Confidential), 1972–1975. HKRS No.163/9–233 and HKRS No.396/1-4. Public Records Office, Hong Kong.

Name of company (Address of company, telephone)	Owner(s) of company	Year and address of building built by the company	Possible record in Company Registry (Period of registration)
Chan Nam-fat Construction Co. Fung Fat-kee (6/F, 138 Lung Chun Road)	Chan Nam-fat Fung Fat-kee	1975: 6 Lung Chun Road 2 nd Lane 1976: 18/19/19 A Tung Tau Chuen Road	No No
Hop Yick Co. Kong Chai Kee Construction Company	Cheng Hak-kong (aka Kong Chai Kee) Chan Wing-Shu	1975: 10 Tin Hau Temple Street 1970: Tung Nam House 66-68 Lung Chun Road 1971: Tung Shing House 70 Lung Chun Road 1975: 6 Lung Chun Avenue	No No
Luen Hing Co. (24 Tung Tau Tsuen Road, 3-831033)	Wong Keung	1975: 25 Lo Yan Street 1975: 24 Tung Tau Tsuen Road	No
Luen Hop Co. (3/F, 15 3 rd Lane Lung Chun Ave)	Chan Yu Hoi	1976: 2/3/4/5/9/9 A Sai Shing Road	No
Ngan Sze-hing Construction Co. (65 Tung Tsing Road, 3-824222)		1972: Built Hing Yuen Building and Tung Nam Building Ngan Sze-hing used the 5 th floor of the building as a purchasing office	
Sam Hing Co. Shing Kwong Construction Co.	Chan Chun-kwong (Triad and gambling stall owner) Wong Yiu-kiung	1975: 14-17, 21 Lung Chun 3 rd Lane 1972: 37-40 West City Road	No No
Shun Hing Co. (G/F, 16 Lo Yan Street)	Chan Shing	1976: 45-47 Lung Chun Ave (Fig 13) 1975: 20 Lo Yan Street (Fig 14)	No
Shun Lee Construction Co.(28 Lo Yan Street, 3-761255)		1976: 60/64/66 Lung Chun Road	No
Tung Ning Const. Co.	Li Ching Kee Cheng Tse-man Lee Hong Ngai Kin-wing	1975: 152 Lung Chun Road 19xx: 40-43 Sai Shing Road 1973: 49-51 Lung Shing Road	Tung Ning Fat Kee Investment Company Limited (1975-2002) Wing Chung Pak Investment Company Limited (1975-1992)
Wing Chung Construction Co. (17 Tung Tsing Road)			No
Wing Fung Construction Co. Wong Kam-shing Construction and Transport Company (Nga Tsin Wai Road)	Cheng Kong Wong Kam-shing	1976: 5/5 A/6/7/9 Lung Chun Ave 1975: developer of 3 Cheung On Lane 1975: 190 Sung Yee Lane	No Wong Kam Shing & Sons Land Investment Company Limited (1973-1995)
Yin Kam Tong (129 Portland Street, 1/F)	Chan Chi-ting Wong Tip-kwan (Landlord) Ngai Kin-wing (Triad leader and architect) Wong Kam-shing (Constructor)	After 1972: Renamed to Kwong Li Co Wong Kam-shing dropped out in 1973 and started practicing as a contractor in the Kowloon Walled City	No

Table 3

Names of other builders of the Kowloon Walled City.

Source: General Correspondence Files (Confidential), 1972–1975. HKRS No.163/9–233 and HKRS No.396/1-4. Public Records Office, Hong Kong.

Name	Identity	Building built
Chan Lee	Triads [sic]	
Wong Tiu-kiung		
Kwong Tsai-kee	Triad leaders	1972: Built Hing Yuen Building and Tung Nam Building
Chow Muk-wang	[sic]	
Cheong Chung-wing		
Ngan Sze-kwong		Year Unknown: Hing Yuen House 63 Tung Ching Road
Hung Ping		
Wong Yat-kwan		Year Unknown: 49-51 Lung Shing Road
Chan Tat Fung		Year Unknown: Left of 40 A Tung Tau Tseun Road (owned by Chan Chung-kwong, Lam Sam-yuk and Wong Ming)
Chan Sap		Year Unknown: 148-152 Lung Chun Road
Lee Hung-kee		
Ngan Muk-chun	Developer	1975: 24 Tung Tau Chuen Road
Chan Tze-ming		1975: 74 Lung Chun Road – Nam Ming Building
Hong Sheung-shun		1975: 8 Tin Hau Temple Street

6. Quality of life in the “Kowloon Walled City”

In the City, often hailed as the last remaining territory under Chinese rule throughout Hong Kong’s colonial period, community ties were quite strong. According to the third interviewee, Ms. Chan, she had fond memories of her childhood years living on Tai Chang Street, where the nearby owners of a grocery store would often allow her,

together with some friends, to have meals there for free. She also spoke of her mother taking care of three ladies (whom she suspected of being prostitutes or courtesans) who lived next door by cooking for them in return for a minimal payment of around \$100 per month. These ladies remained family friends with them until they moved out of the City by the early 1990s.

During a class visit with students to the City’s public park in 2016, the second author met a lady who lived in the City during the 1960s before immigrating to the U.S. She said she returned to Hong Kong as a tourist to see what was going on in her hometown, which she always remembered fondly. It appears that discussing the City brought back positive memories for many former residents.

In the City, property prices were much more affordable than in many other areas of urban Hong Kong. Also, with units ranging in size from 400 to 700 square feet, they were far bigger than housing units in contemporary resettlement and public housing estates, where a standard room was only around 120 square feet (Hopkins, 1971, p.302, underlining authors’). Moreover, in the third model of ‘neighbourhood social features’ proposed by Sirgy and Cornwell, (2012, pp.102-103), interactions with neighbours and race relations in the community were also vital factors for evaluating one’s community and life satisfaction.

The complexity of the unit layouts within the City ensured a sense of privacy for residents and, hence, enhanced their community satisfaction. The design of these interweaving units effectively connected people to form a community within the City and allowed for mutual cooperation. In other words, the quality of life within the City was probably not as bad as depicted in most studies or the media, according to the above data and oral history accounts. At least it fulfilled various important criteria for life satisfaction. This was not necessarily the case for costlier private housing outside the City.

7. Conclusion

This study shows that the construction of the City lasted only a short while during the City's history as a contested place. The City's building market was competitive with a large number of builders and the flats they built were comparable to, if not better than, their counterparts in the public sector during the early 1970s in terms of size, layout, and structural quality. The large number of builders, almost 30 in all, for such a compact place suggested the market for private redevelopment was highly competitive and there was no sign of a cartel, although the police concluded that there were only four major players. Moreover, as Hong Kong's construction industry is characterised by subcontracting, in which only one firm is known to have permanent employees, the authors could infer that the subcontractors and building workers were the same people who built Hong Kong's private and public housing, as well as its industrial and commercial units.

By digging into hitherto unreported and undisclosed documents and through interviews with residents, the authors revealed the builders and layout samples for the City at the beginning of its vertical growth phase. The authors found that the City's structures had a significant impact on Hong Kong's housing history, which should not be buried underneath Kowloon Walled City Park or what is left of the demolished City. Moreover, for those who want to determine if the city was as "dark" a place as often perceived, the layout of the flats is only a starting point. The buildings discussed in this article had intricate connections to the neighbourhood they created.

Apart from the physical aspects such as satisfaction with build quality and home, community satisfaction also played an important role in determining the quality of life, as indicated by the conceptual model in *Sirgy and Cornwell's (2012)* study. Further research is required to determine if these buildings were able to facilitate interactions between neighbours, which would increase 'social satisfaction' and forge better living conditions for City residents compared to public housing.

As a study of a highly functional and unique, but forever gone, urban settlement, this article should have shed more light on the 'City of Darkness' and stimulate future research on Hong Kong's urban planning and housing history in various aspects. Two are offered here. First, the propensity to own a flat, as evidenced by the recollections of two interviewees and even in situations of incomplete property rights (in the sense of the lack of court adjudication to resolve property disputes), was so strong that a policy to promote home ownership cannot be seen as unreasonable. Critics of the government's homeownership concerns may want to reconsider their case in light of the home purchases in the City. Second, the role of residents' associations in local social planning should be given more government support, as they can be useful extra-governmental means to handle a community's public affairs and serve as a bridge between the state and citizens. Many Kaifong Associations still exist in Hong Kong, but their missions are opaque. Whether they can renew themselves by drawing lessons from the City's Kaifong association is something to ponder.

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