

For a better Harbourfront and cleaner air, re-claim land from roads

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P2 road and the new Central Harbourfront

Reclamation of the Harbour is now in progress in Central and Wanchai, to accommodate the tunnel road known as Central-Wanchai Bypass (CWB) and to provide more civic open space, notably in Central-Admiralty. This is against the background that, reflecting the public's aspirations about the Harbourfront, on 9.1.2004 the Court of Final Appeal (CFA) ruled that any reclamation must pass the test of "overriding public need".

Unlike the CWB, its distributor road P2 will be constructed as a highway on ground surface. It will run in front of City Hall, from General Post Office to Wanchai North. In Central-Admiralty, the land reserved for P2 is 40 metres wide.

Major urban roads like P2 pose drawbacks that are especially onerous in Hong Kong. Together with their roundabouts, divides and "islands", as well as carparks, they occupy, cut up and sterilize large tracts of valuable land, especially near waterfronts, e.g. by the Causeway Bay Typhoon Shelter. They generate air pollution – Central and Causeway Bay being black spots – and noise pollution. Noise barriers and flyovers pose visual obstacles.

Moreover, even with their pedestrian crossings (which are necessarily spaced wide apart), underpasses and footbridges, major roads constitute the great divide between pedestrians and their destinations, in this case the Harbourfront. Examples include the distributor roads behind Harbour Building – of which P2 would be a continuation, and Harcourt Road – despite its footbridges to the waterfront near CITIC Tower.

The answer is to put these roads with their roundabouts etc. below ground level wherever possible. At ground level, instead of P2 with its roaring traffic, one would find a green setting with premier shops, restaurants offering outdoor dining, perhaps a "collective memories gallery" beneath the old Star Ferry clock tower as its portal, etc. Buildings would be low-rise and make the most use of underground space. The waterfront can be accessed easily on foot through this belt, or by a road, with trams, no wider than Johnston Road.

Putting P2 underground would increase usable surface land, or reduce reclamation needs, by an area nearly 40 metres times P2's length. More land conservation and Harbourfront amelioration can be achieved if, upon the capacity leap on completion of CWB and P2, the opportunity is taken to re-provision Connaught Road Central, Harcourt Road, Gloucester Road and their roundabouts etc. to below ground level.

Unlike for surface roads, there is no adverse impact for underground roads to comprise more than one deck and thereby save on land and costs. Indeed P2 can be an upper deck to CWB.

Resolving “temporary reclamation” in Wanchai; and Eastern Corridor longer-term

Given that the Central-Admiralty reclamation already provides abundant civic open space, the Town Planning Board has responded positively to objections by drawing up amendments to curtail reclamation in Wanchai. However, reclamation can and should be reduced further.

As currently planned, the CWB is basically a tunnel some distance off the existing shoreline. To protect it from ships, land is reclaimed creating a new shoreline well seaward of the tunnel. Due probably to the tunnel's depth and complexity, a good deal of the reclaimed land in Wanchai is slated for a CWB administration building, ventilation buildings and ventilation shafts. Also, the CWB tunnel will criss-cross the existing Cross Harbour Tunnel and planned Shatin-Central Line tunnel, posing some construction complexities and risks.

A further complication is that, under the government proposal, temporary reclamation is required for the CWB to run below seabed – across the former cargo handling basin and the Causeway Bay Typhoon Shelter. However, in March 2008, the High Court ruled that even temporary reclamation would be subject to the 2004 CFA determination. The ruling could substantially set back the CWB and Shatin-Central Link projects.

A simpler approach that consumes less land/harbour and also obviates any temporary reclamation is for the CWB road to run just below ground level, mostly on land reclaimed immediately along the existing shoreline, but also “cutting corners” by going under the existing Hung Hing Road sewage facilities and Cross Harbour Tunnel access ramp.

Such reclamation would only be as wide as the road itself with, say, steel casing and extra concrete protection on the seaward side. The about 60-metre wide strip will provide sufficient open space with low-rise structures for water-related recreational and commercial uses consistent with the planned marine character of the Wanchai harbourfront. Traditional typhoon shelter activities, an expanded marina, dinghy-sailing facilities, etc. will liven up the harbourfront here.

The existing Wanchai Pier should be moved westward to along Expo Drive East. Sheltered water might also be created west of the Convention and Exhibition Centre for rowboating – a pastime available in many urban central parks, but practically extinct in Hong Kong due to past reclamations – thereby revitalizing that currently deserted shore.

Longer term, the Island Eastern Corridor, which has sterilized half the Island harbourfront, should be reprovisioned underground using the methods described above. A rejuvenated waterfront would appear, serving such people-oriented purposes as water taxis, shops, seafood market, a waterfront amusement park, neighbourhood parks and residential buildings of, say, under ten storeys. Economic uses such as cruiser berths are also possible.

Cleaner air

Existing scrubber systems can already remove upwards of 80% of pollutants from vehicle emissions in tunnels. In sum, in Hong Kong, any opportunity to build, or re-provision as, underground roads should be grasped. The higher construction costs would be offset by the value of surface land released, and by improvements to air quality, noise level, urban landscape, and accessibility to pedestrians.

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